THE OKLAHOMA ACADEMY

Town Hall

Challenges to Change: Shaping Tomorrow's Classrooms

2026 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall

WinStar World Casino and Resort

Thackerville, Oklahoma

October 18-21, 2026

THE OKLAHOMA ACADEMY

Town Hall

The Oklahoma Academy for State Goals was founded on a simple belief: Oklahoma is stronger when people with different experiences, perspectives and political views come together, listen to one another and work toward the greater good.

That belief was deeply personal to Gov. Henry Bellmon.

Long before becoming Oklahoma's first Republican governor, Bellmon served as a Marine tank platoon leader in the Pacific during World War II, seeing intense combat on Saipan and Iwo Jima. Between campaigns, he was stationed in Hawaii, where he interacted with Japanese people living there and found them kind and hospitable.

The contrast left a lasting impression. On the battlefield, Bellmon had fought Japanese soldiers in a brutal war. Away from it, he encountered ordinary people whose humanity was no different from his own. He came to understand that people on opposing sides were often more alike than circumstances made them appear.

That lesson followed Bellmon into public life, shaping his belief in civility, fairness, cooperation and practical problem-solving.

During his first term as governor, Bellmon recognized a need for those same principles in Oklahoma. Citizens needed a place where difficult issues could be examined outside partisan politics, where disagreement did not make people adversaries and where different perspectives could contribute to solutions.

Nearly six decades after Bellmon helped establish the organization, the need for that kind of forum has not disappeared. If anything, it has become more important.

The Oklahoma Academy for State Goals exists because complex problems rarely belong to one political party, one community or one point of view. They require people willing to come to the same table, armed with good information, prepared to listen and committed to finding solutions together.

That was Henry Bellmon's vision in 1967, and it remains the Academy's purpose today.

Building Awareness, Developing Policies, Inspiring Oklahomans to Move Ideas Into Action!

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Town Hall

Academy President and CEO



JULIE KNUTSON
President and CEO

Hello 2026 Town Hall Participants!

Welcome to the 2026 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall, "*Challenges to Change: Shaping Tomorrow's Classrooms.*"

Oklahoma's classrooms are changing, just as the world around them is changing. New technology, workforce demands and changing student needs raise important questions about how our schools are structured and how we prepare students for what comes next. This Town Hall is our opportunity to dig into those questions.

Over the following days, you will work with Oklahomans from across the state to discuss the structure of the school day, curriculum and future opportunities, support for educators and school communities, and how we define student success.

This Background Resource Document was prepared to give you a common starting point for those conversations. Please read it before you arrive. You do not have to agree with everything in these pages, but you do need to come prepared to ask questions, share your perspective and listen to others. The quality of the Town Hall depends on the preparation and participation of everyone in the room.

This year, the Academy also traveled across Oklahoma for Community Town Hall Sessions, hearing directly from educators, parents, employers and community members about their schools. Those voices are reflected in this document on pages XVI through XIX and will help inform your discussions.

Your assignment is simple: come prepared, speak up, listen closely and be willing to consider a different point of view. At the end of the Town Hall, the recommendations will not belong to the Academy staff or Board — they will belong to you, the participants.

Thank you for committing your time and energy to this process. I'm excited to welcome you to Town Hall 2026 and, most importantly, to see what you accomplish together.

With appreciation,

Julie Knutson
President & CEO
The Oklahoma Academy for State Goals

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Town Hall

2026 Town Hall Leadership

Dear Town Hall Participant,



LANA REYNOLDS
Oklahoma Academy Board & Town Hall Chair

Education touches nearly every part of Oklahoma's future. It shapes the opportunities available to our children, the strength of our workforce, the vitality of our communities, and ultimately the kind of state we will become.

That is why the 2026 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall, *Challenges to Change: Shaping Tomorrow's Classrooms*, is so important.

Across Oklahoma, there is no shortage of opinions about education. What is often harder to find is the opportunity to bring people with different experiences and perspectives together and create the space for thoughtful discussion about what should come next.

That is the purpose of this Background Resource Document.

The pages that follow are not intended to tell you what to think or what conclusions the Town Hall should reach. Instead, they provide context, research and a range of perspectives to help us ask better questions and have more informed conversations.

This year, we will examine how the school day is structured, how curriculum connects learning with future opportunities, how we support educators and school communities, and how we define and strengthen student success. We will also consider what changing expectations, technology and workforce needs and the lives of today's students mean for the classrooms of tomorrow.

The Oklahoma Academy has long believed that meaningful public policy begins with informed citizens willing to listen to one another, challenge assumptions and search for common ground. The Town Hall process does not require us to enter discussions with the same ideas. It asks us to arrive prepared to learn from one another.

As you read this document, consider not only what you agree with, but what challenges your thinking. Bring your own experiences to the conversation. Ask questions. Listen closely to perspectives different from your own. Come prepared to help move the conversation from the challenges we know to the changes Oklahoma may need.

The recommendations that emerge will belong to the participants — Oklahomans from different communities, professions, backgrounds and points of view working toward a stronger future for our students.

Thank you for being part of this important work. I look forward to the conversations ahead and to seeing where they lead us.

Sincerely,

Lana Reynolds

Lana Reynolds
2026 Chair, Board of Directors
The Oklahoma Academy for State Goals
President, Seminole State College

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Town Hall

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Town Hall

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Choctaw Nation Educational Services

The Choctaw Nation Partnership of Summer School Education (POSSE) partners with local school districts within its tribal jurisdiction to provide a summer learning program for qualifying Kindergarten, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade students identified by an approved Oklahoma Reading Sufficiency Act. POSSE utilizes a hands-on, engaging educational environment to deliver intense reading and math intervention and enrichment activities. Sessions focus on reading and math, and activities aim to deliver instruction in STEM, art, music, nutrition, and physical education. POSSE has expanded across the Choctaw Nation to support over 80 school districts in 10 southeastern Oklahoma counties.

Brent Bushey



As the CEO of Fuel OKC, Brent Bushey is passionate about providing all students with quality public school options. Before joining Fuel OKC, he spent a decade leading the Oklahoma Public School Resource Center, an education nonprofit supporting public schools across the state. Through his dedication to public education and community involvement, Brent is committed to improving academic outcomes for Oklahoma City students.

Moises Echeverria



Moises Echeverria serves as president & chief executive officer of the Foundation for Tulsa Schools providing strategic leadership to build a stronger community through the support of Tulsa Public Schools. He believes education is the greatest resource to help individuals succeed in life, and quality public education is the greatest asset to help communities thrive. Echeverria is a proud Tulsa Public Schools alumnus from East Central High School.

John H. Feaver, Ph.D.



John Feaver was named 12th President of Oklahoma's public liberal arts college in 2000. Under his leadership the institution was three times named the No. 1 public, undergraduate college in the western United States by U.S. News and World Report. Before he became president, Dr. Feaver spent 20 years on the faculty and 12 years as vice president for academic affairs at Oklahoma's public liberal arts college. After more than two decades of highly distinguished leadership, Dr. Feaver announced his retirement from the presidency of USAO at the end of 2023.

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Christy Gillenwater



Christy became the President & Chief Executive Officer of the Greater Oklahoma City Chamber on January 5, 2023. Christy previously served as President & CEO of the Chattanooga Chamber of Commerce, and prior to that, President & CEO of the Southwest Indiana Chamber and President & CEO of the Greater Bloomington Chamber of Commerce in Indiana. Christy was born and raised in Cincinnati, Ohio. In 2012, Christy was named a Certified Chamber Executive (CCE), the only national certification for chamber professionals.

April Grace, Ed.D.



Dr. April Grace's role at the Oklahoma Public School Resource Center draws upon her vast experience in Oklahoma education, her field of choice since 1989. Her leadership is a guiding force within our organization. Diverse experiences have contributed to her ability to serve OPSRC and their member organizations. Dr. Grace has served as a classroom teacher, site-level administrator, an assistant superintendent of human resources, and, ultimately, district superintendent

Brent Haken



Brent Haken was appointed as the ninth state director of the Oklahoma Department of Career and Technology Education in January 2023. Prior to this role, he served as superintendent of Morrison Public Schools, where he led the district for four years. With a strong background in education and leadership, Haken has heldmultiple positions within Morrison Public Schools, including agricultural education instructor, elementary assistant principal, special education director, high school principal, and testing coordinator.

Shawn Hime, Ph.D.



Dr. Shawn Hime joined the Oklahoma State School Boards Association as executive director in 2014, building on a long career of serving schools and students throughout Oklahoma. Before joining OSSBA, Hime served for six years as superintendent of Enid Public Schools. He also worked as a teacher and administrator in Ardmore Public Schools and other districts. Hime serves on the state Education Department's Teacher Shortage Task Force, School Leaders Risk Management Association board of directors, the Oklahoma Educational Technology Trust board of directors and as past chairman of the Oklahoma Education Coalition.

Homeschool Oklahoma

Homeschool Oklahoma is Oklahoma's statewide homeschool organization that believe parents have the God-given right to choose how to raise and educate their children to become the next generation of world-changing leaders. HSOK advocates for homeschool freedom by protecting and promoting family-funded, parent-led, home-based education. They understand that the heart of the child should be inspired and supported through discipleship, so we encourage and equip parents along their home education journey.

Kendra S. Horn



Former Congresswoman Kendra S. Horn is a visionary leader and advocate for public education and community-driven solutions. As President and CEO of the Oklahoma City Public Schools Foundation, Kendra leads efforts to strengthen schools, support OKCPS students, teachers, and families through community investment, strategic partnerships, and innovative programs. Kendra brings a deep understanding of the connection between education, strong communities, and workforce development.

Brysn Hunt



Brysn Hunt serves as the Director of Workforce Development for the Association of Oklahoma General Contractors. AOGC represents companies that build roads, bridges, and critical infrastructure across Oklahoma. Brysn attended East Central University in Ada, OK, and obtained a Bachelor of Science in Kinesiology. Following graduation, Brysn became a teacher and coach serving at Little Axe High School, Shawnee High School, Crooked Oak High School, and Yukon High School.

Erica Irvine



Erica Irvine is President of Junior Achievement of Oklahoma, where she leads one of the state's largest organizations dedicated to preparing young people for success through financial literacy, work readiness, and entrepreneurship education. Under her leadership, Junior Achievement serves more than 66,000 students annually through innovative, hands-on learning experiences that connect classroom education to real-world careers and economic opportunity.

K20 Center

The K20 Center at the University of Oklahoma is a collaborative network of school, university, and community partners dedicated to transforming education through innovation and research. With a focus on accessible and authentic learning, technology integration, and collaboration, the K20 Center develops resources and experiences that strengthen teaching, learning, leadership, and college and career readiness. Through partnerships and community connections, the Center works to advance innovative practices that positively influence education in Oklahoma and beyond.

Kirkpatrick Policy Group

Kirkpatrick Policy Group is a nonpartisan, independent, 501(c)(4) social welfare organization established in 2017. Our mission is to identify, support, and advocate for positions on issues affecting all Oklahomans, including concern for the arts and arts education, animals, and women's reproductive health. Improving the quality of life for Oklahomans is our primary vision, seeking to accomplish this through our shared values of collaboration, respect, education, and stewardship.

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Chan Klingensmith



Chan Klingensmith is the Vice President of Community Development and Government Affairs for the Norman Chamber of Commerce in Norman, OK. Chan is a native Oklahoman who grew up in several small communities around the state. After graduating from the University of Oklahoma with a bachelor's degree in communication in 1999, he moved to Washington, D.C. and served on the staff of Oklahoma Congressman Frank Lucas and Senator Don Nickles.

Autumn Kouba, M.Ed.



Autumn Kouba is the Senior Director of Teacher Recruitment and Retention at the Oklahoma State Department of Education. Passionate about supporting educators, she leads initiatives to attract, develop, and retain top teaching talent across the state. Autumn brings experience in education, mentoring, teacher coaching, leadership, and strategic workforce planning. Her work focuses on creating sustainable solutions to strengthen the teaching profession and improve student outcomes in Oklahoma.

Lori Lake, M.Ed.



Lori Lake served as Executive Director of Reach Out and Read Oklahoma where she led statewide efforts to integrate early literacy, early relational health, and family engagement into pediatric primary care. With more than three decades of experience in education as an instructional coach, literacy specialist, special education teacher, and teacher trainer, Lori brings extensive expertise in literacy and program innovation.

Michelle Maikoetter, MA, NCC, LPC-S



Michelle Maikoetter's lifelong interest in helping others led her to become one of the foremost trauma-informed professional childcare specialists in the United States. Her professional experience includes working in domestic violence/sexual assault, after school programming, wilderness programming, juvenile justice and residential, educational, and community-based settings. For the last 15 years, Ms Maikoetter has worked collaboratively with the Neurosequential Network to distill the clinical concepts of the Model into applicable, actionable and understandable terms in order for those working and living with children in their shared life space to make the biggest impact.

Linda Manaugh



Linda Manaugh is a retired educator who taught children with special needs and served in administrative roles in K–12 and CareerTech. After her first retirement, she spent seven years as Chief Programs Officer for the Potts Family Foundation before retiring again in 2024. Among her proudest accomplishments are helping develop and support the Raising Resilient Oklahomans initiative, which brings resilience education and NEAR Science training to communities across the state, and securing a $9 million ARPA-funded grant from the Oklahoma Legislature to support infants, toddlers and families impacted by the pandemic. The grant has helped establish eight family resource centers serving 23 rural Oklahoma counties.

Danny Mattox, M.Ed.



Danny Mattox joined the K20 Center in 2015 on the GEAR UP for the PROMISE grant. Danny started his career in television, working at stations in Oklahoma, Indiana, and Georgia. As the operations director of a public access TV station in Atlanta, he saw the transformative power of education and developed a passion for it. Since getting his education degree, Danny has been a science teacher, project director for the GEAR UP for MY SUCCESS grant, and Head of Education at the Sam Noble Museum.

Hayley Riggs McGhee



Hayley Riggs McGhee, who oversees the foundation's communications activities, joined the staff of the Oklahoma Foundation for Excellence in 2023. She previously served as creative manager of the Travel Promotion Division of the Oklahoma Tourism & Recreation Department and is a former assistant sports editor at The Oklahoman. An Academic All-State alumna, she is a Roland native and a citizen of the Cherokee Nation. She holds a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Oklahoma and a master's degree in strategic communications from Arkansas State University.

Jennifer McGrail



Jennifer McGrail is an innovation connector and catalyst who builds partnerships across many sectors. She is Founder and Managing Partner of McGrail Strategic Partners, advising on public private partnerships, new organization creation, and startup growth. As former Executive Director of the Oklahoma Center for the Advancement of Science and Technology (OCAST) and Oklahoma's Deputy Secretary of Science and Innovation, she led a portfolio that annually generated more than $1 billion in total impact and nearly 2,900 jobs created or retained.

Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education

The Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education are the coordinating board for the state system of public colleges and universities, which is comprised of 25 institutions – including two research universities, 10 regional universities, one public liberal arts university and 12 community colleges – and 10 constituent agencies and one university center. Each institution is governed by a board of regents.

Rebekah Peitz



Rebekah Peitz serves as the Neodesha Promise Administrator and College Academic Coach for USD 461, where she works to help students navigate their post secondary education careers. With more than twelve years of experience in postsecondary education, Rebekah brings extensive knowledge and experience in college admissions, recruitment, enrollment, and student retention. She is passionate about connecting students with the resources, opportunities, and support they need to confidently pursue their educational and career goals.

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Lisa Schade



Lisa Schade is the CEO of Trinity School at Edgemere, an award-winning K–12 school in Oklahoma City dedicated to empowering students with learning differences. Under her leadership, Trinity has become a nationally recognized model for innovative education, earning a 2025 Yass Prize Semifinalist designation for reimagining how schools can better serve neurodiverse learners through innovation, access, and measurable impact.

Courtney Scott



Courtney Scott serves as the Chief Communications Officer for Norman Public Schools. She brings nearly two decades of experience leading strategic communications, branding, and engagement initiatives in public education. Known for her creative vision and collaborative leadership, she has developed and executed comprehensive communication strategies that elevate district messaging, foster community engagement, and support student success. Her work spans creative direction, crisis communication, media relations, marketing, and internal communications—skills she has refined through years of service in both district-level and executive roles.

Ann Rosales



Ann Rosales has dedicated 20 years to education through her work with Norman Public Schools (NPS), where she currently serves as the Director of Elementary Teaching and Learning. She earned a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education from the University of Central Oklahoma and a master's degree in Education Administration from East Central University. She also completed the National Institute for School Leadership program, further strengthening her expertise in systems leadership and school improvement.

Jessica Thompson, M.S. Ed.



Jessica Thompson is a 24-year veteran educator, science and engineering teacher, robotics coach, and STEM advocate at Mount St. Mary Catholic High School in Oklahoma City. She was named the 2026 Oklahoma City Archdiocese Catholic Educator of the Year and received the OU K20 Center's 2025 Central Region SKIE Award. Jessica is also a doctoral candidate at the University of Oklahoma's Jeannine Rainbolt College of Education, focusing on educational leadership, science literacy, and Catholic education.

Adam Tyner, Ph.D.



Adam Tyner is Executive Director of the Oklahoma Center for Education Policy (OCEP) at the University of Oklahoma, where he oversees OCEP's research initiatives, public engagement, and strategy to strengthen evidence-based policymaking in Oklahoma. Tyner also serves as Executive Editor of the Oklahoma Education Journal. Prior to joining OCEP, Tyner was National Research Director at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, where he led studies on issues ranging from student achievement gaps to school discipline reform and advanced coursework.

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Town Hall

Community Town Hall Report

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Shaping Tomorrow's Classrooms: What Oklahoma Communities Told Us

Oklahoma Academy Staff and Research Committee



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During the summer of 2026, The Oklahoma Academy conducted Community Town Halls across Oklahoma to gather local perspectives on one of the state's most important issues: the future of public education. These discussions served as the first step in preparing for the 2026 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall, where participants from across the state will develop consensus recommendations to strengthen Oklahoma's education system.

Community Town Halls were held in communities representing every region of Oklahoma, including rural towns, suburban districts, and metropolitan areas. Educators, business leaders, parents, nonprofit organizations, elected officials, Tribal representatives, higher education leaders, and other community stakeholders participated in structured discussions designed to identify both local challenges and statewide opportunities.

Before discussion began, participants received a presentation outlining the evolution of Oklahoma's education system, current funding structures, workforce trends, staffing shortages, changes in school calendars, and other data intended to provide a common foundation for discussion. Participants were then divided into small groups and asked to consider two questions:

1. **What is the most important change—at the school, community, or state level—that would most improve student learning outcomes in your community, and why?**
2. **What role should the community play in supporting student success, and where are we falling short today?**

Each discussion group selected a recorder to document its conversation before presenting key findings to the larger audience. Participants then identified the ideas that best represented the consensus of their community.

Although every community brought its own unique experiences and priorities, remarkably consistent themes emerged across Oklahoma. Participants repeatedly emphasized the importance of attracting and retaining highly qualified teachers, strengthening parent engagement, improving early literacy, addressing student mental health and behavioral challenges, reducing unnecessary burdens on educators, and building stronger partnerships between schools and their communities.

Communities also expressed concern that public education has increasingly been asked to address challenges that extend far beyond academics. Participants described schools serving as providers of meals, counseling, healthcare referrals, workforce preparation, childcare support, and family services while continuing to meet increasing academic expectations. Many believed student success depends not only on classroom instruction but also on stable families, engaged communities, strong local leadership, and coordinated support systems.

Another recurring theme was the desire to prepare students for

multiple successful futures. While college readiness remains important, participants consistently advocated for expanding career pathways, apprenticeships, internships, career and technical education, financial literacy, and life skills so students graduate prepared for a variety of opportunities.

Technology also emerged as a significant topic of discussion. Many communities supported thoughtful use of technology but expressed concern about excessive screen time, declining reading habits, diminished attention spans, and reduced interpersonal communication. Participants frequently called for a better balance between digital instruction and traditional teaching methods.

Perhaps the strongest message heard throughout Oklahoma was that improving education cannot rest solely with schools. Participants consistently described education as a shared responsibility involving parents, businesses, nonprofits, faith organizations, higher education, local governments, and community volunteers. While schools remain the center of educational efforts, communities recognized that meaningful improvements will require greater collaboration among all sectors.

The Community Town Halls revealed broad agreement that Oklahoma's education challenges are complex but solvable. Participants consistently demonstrated optimism that through stronger partnerships, improved support for educators, engaged families, and thoughtful public policy, Oklahoma can create classrooms that better prepare every student for lifelong success.

INTRODUCTION

Education has long been recognized as one of the foundations of Oklahoma's economic prosperity, civic strength, and quality of life. As the state continues to experience changing workforce demands, evolving technology, shifting demographics, and increasing expectations for public schools, Oklahoma faces an important opportunity to examine how its education system can best prepare students for the future.

Recognizing the importance of these issues, The Oklahoma Academy selected education as the focus of its 2026 Town Hall. The Academy's Town Hall process has, for more than five decades, brought together diverse Oklahomans to develop practical, consensus-based public policy recommendations on the state's most pressing challenges. Community Town Halls provide an essential first step in that process by ensuring the experiences and perspectives of local communities help shape the statewide conversation.

Throughout the summer of 2026, Community Town Halls were conducted across Oklahoma in communities representing diverse geographic regions, school districts, and economic conditions. Each meeting brought together educators, parents, business leaders, nonprofit organizations, elected officials, higher education representatives, Tribal leaders, students, and engaged citizens to discuss the future of public education.

Rather than beginning with proposed solutions, participants first examined the evolution of Oklahoma's education system and current statewide data related to school funding, staffing, instructional time, and workforce trends. This common foundation encouraged informed discussion while allowing participants to focus on the unique strengths and challenges facing their own communities.

Participants then worked in facilitated small-group discussions to answer two guiding questions centered on improving student learning and identifying the community's role in supporting educational success. Each group selected a recorder to capture the discussion before presenting its findings to the full group. Through this process, each Community Town Hall identified the ideas that best reflected local consensus.

The following sections summarize the discussions held in each participating community. While many themes emerged consistently across Oklahoma, each community also identified priorities shaped by its own experiences, resources, and local needs. Together, these conversations provide valuable insight into the opportunities and challenges that will inform the work of the 2026 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall.

I think this provides a strong, professional opening and sets the tone for the rest of the report. Next, I'll begin the Community Findings section, starting with Enid, and continue through each community in the same polished narrative style.

COMMUNITY FINDINGS

Enid



Enid participants focused much of their discussion on strengthening the instructional environment inside the classroom while recognizing the important role families and the broader community play in student success. Throughout the discussion, participants repeatedly emphasized that improving reading proficiency should remain one of Oklahoma's highest priorities. Reading comprehension was viewed as a foundational skill upon which every other academic subject depends, leading participants to advocate for additional reading specialists and greater instructional support for struggling readers. Some questioned whether current instructional periods, particularly in STEM subjects, provide adequate time for students to fully engage with increasingly complex material.

Participants also discussed changes they have observed in both students and the teaching profession over time. Concerns were raised about increased screen time and its impact on student attention, engagement, and reading habits. Several groups noted that changes in home structure and family dynamics have also influenced student readiness to learn before entering the classroom.

Protecting classroom instructional time emerged as another

important priority. While participants recognized the value of extracurricular activities, they stressed the importance of ensuring those activities do not unnecessarily reduce academic learning time. Participants also discussed the challenge of meeting the diverse learning needs of students within a single classroom while maintaining high expectations for all learners. Accountability for student performance, along with providing teachers the tools needed to differentiate instruction, was viewed as essential for improving outcomes.

Teacher preparation and retention were recurring topics. Participants expressed concern about the growing number of alternatively certified teachers entering classrooms without sufficient preparation and emphasized the need for ongoing professional development and mentoring opportunities to support educators throughout their careers.

When discussing the community's role in supporting education, participants described Enid as having a strong network of schools, businesses, churches, civic organizations, and community leaders already invested in student success. They encouraged expanding volunteer reading programs, inviting professionals into classrooms to introduce students to future careers, and strengthening partnerships between schools and local organizations. Participants also discussed whether additional flexibility should be provided for teachers to remove students for individualized instruction when necessary and suggested examining district consolidation at the state level as one possible strategy for improving educational efficiency. Overall, participants believed Enid possesses many of the community partnerships necessary for student success and should continue building upon those existing strengths.

Shawnee



Participants in Shawnee consistently returned to one central theme: successful schools begin with strong families and well-supported teachers. Across multiple discussion groups, participants described changes in family structure, declining parental involvement, and increasing social challenges as significant factors influencing student achievement.

Many participants believed restoring stronger partnerships between schools and families is essential to improving educational outcomes. Parents were encouraged to become more actively involved in their children's education by reading with students, maintaining communication with teachers, and reinforcing the importance of learning at home. Several participants suggested that many parents simply lack the knowledge or confidence needed to support their children's education and recommended providing educational resources and family engagement opportunities to help bridge that gap.

Teacher support was another dominant topic throughout the discussions. Participants emphasized that teachers should be given greater authority to manage classrooms effectively while also receiving stronger support from school leaders and policymakers. Concerns were expressed regarding the increasing number of alternatively certified teachers entering classrooms without sufficient preparation. Participants recommended additional professional development, mentoring, and ongoing training to ensure every teacher is fully equipped to meet students' academic and behavioral needs.

Several groups also encouraged lawmakers to seek more direct input from educators when considering education policy. Participants expressed interest in reviewing school funding formulas, exploring school consolidation where appropriate, and examining accountability systems, including allowing additional testing opportunities similar to those used in neighboring states. Faster reporting of assessment results was also suggested as a way to better inform instructional decisions.

Beyond academics, participants discussed the growing importance of providing students with access to mental health services, food assistance, and other basic supports that influence learning. Workforce development, life skills education, restorative justice practices, and addressing systemic poverty were identified as additional areas requiring community attention.

When discussing the community's role, participants highlighted the significant shortage of childcare available before and after school as one of Shawnee's greatest challenges. Expanding childcare opportunities through employer partnerships, tax incentives, Tribal collaboration, and business involvement was viewed as an important strategy for supporting working families and improving student success. Participants also encouraged greater business engagement with local schools, continued support for school bond initiatives, and expanded collaboration among community organizations to better coordinate services for families. Throughout the discussion, participants emphasized that schools cannot solve educational challenges alone and that strengthening families and community partnerships must remain a shared responsibility.

Central & South Oklahoma City



Participants from Central and South Oklahoma City challenged the discussion to think beyond incremental improvements and consider whether Oklahoma's education system requires more

fundamental change. Rather than focusing on isolated issues, participants questioned whether the current educational model continues to meet the needs of today's students and communities.

Teacher preparation and support emerged as one of the community's highest priorities. Participants expressed concern that many educators enter classrooms underprepared and without sufficient mentoring or professional support. Combined with teacher shortages and salary concerns, participants believed these challenges contribute directly to student achievement and educator retention. Mental health services for both students and educators were also identified as a growing need, with several groups noting that schools increasingly serve students facing significant emotional and behavioral challenges.

Participants also discussed compensation, arguing that attracting and retaining highly qualified educators requires salaries competitive enough to recruit talented professionals into the teaching profession. Investing in people, they argued, remains one of the most important investments Oklahoma can make in its education system.

The second discussion question generated considerable conversation about the community's role in education. Several participants observed that communities often lack a clear understanding of how they can support schools because no shared vision exists for educational success. Before meaningful partnerships can develop, participants suggested Oklahoma must first establish common goals and expectations for what successful schools should accomplish.

Participants also noted that definitions of student success vary widely among individuals and organizations, making collaboration more difficult. Even so, there was widespread agreement that improving education requires a collective effort. Participants repeatedly stated that "it takes a village" to support students and called for stronger partnerships among families, businesses, nonprofits, school foundations, and community organizations.

Participants expressed concern that many parents and community members are increasingly disconnected from schools and that behavioral challenges and life skills education have become greater responsibilities for educators. Strengthening communication, rebuilding community involvement, and creating sustainable support systems outside the classroom were viewed as essential steps toward improving educational outcomes for future generations.

Midwest City



Midwest City participants viewed education through the broader lens of the whole child, emphasizing that academic success depends on creating safe, supportive learning environments while addressing the many factors students bring with them to school each day. Throughout the discussions, participants stressed that schools have become much more than places of instruction. They now serve as safety nets, providing stability and connecting students with services that support their overall well-being.

Several discussion groups identified classroom conditions as one of the most immediate opportunities for improving student learning. Smaller class sizes, particularly in the early grades, were repeatedly cited as essential for allowing teachers to build stronger relationships with students and provide individualized instruction. Participants also called for greater support and professional respect for teachers, noting that educators are increasingly expected to address students' social and emotional needs in addition to delivering rigorous academic instruction.

Early childhood education emerged as another major priority. Participants emphasized that learning begins long before kindergarten and advocated for stronger support systems from birth through age twelve. Access to quality childcare and early learning opportunities was viewed as critical to ensuring children arrive at school prepared to succeed.

Participants also expressed concern about increasing reliance on technology in classrooms. While acknowledging its value as an instructional tool, many believed excessive screen time has diminished student engagement and physical activity. Several groups advocated returning to educational fundamentals while maintaining a thoughtful balance between technology and traditional classroom instruction.

Authentic measurement of student progress also generated discussion. Participants questioned whether current accountability systems accurately reflect student learning and encouraged evaluation methods that measure meaningful academic growth rather than simply standardized performance. Concerns were also raised about promoting students based solely on age or grade level instead of demonstrated mastery.

Community schools and stronger collaboration between schools and local organizations were recurring themes during the second discussion question. Participants envisioned schools serving as community hubs where educational, social, and family services could be coordinated more effectively. Tribal partnerships, community organizations, funding agencies, and local governments were identified as valuable partners in supporting students and families.

Many participants acknowledged that while resources often exist within the community, families frequently struggle to locate or access them. Improving communication, creating centralized information resources, and increasing collaboration among service providers were viewed as practical ways to better support students. Participants also emphasized the importance of helping the broader public understand why strong public schools benefit entire communities, regardless of whether residents currently have children enrolled in school. Overall, Midwest City participants called for stronger communication, coordinated partnerships, and a renewed commitment to supporting both students and educators.

Broken Arrow



Broken Arrow participants consistently emphasized that Oklahoma's greatest educational investment must be in attracting, preparing, and retaining highly qualified teachers. Throughout the discussions, participants argued that improving student achievement begins with building a strong teaching workforce supported by competitive salaries, professional respect, and adequate classroom resources.

Teacher shortages and the growing reliance on emergency-certified educators generated significant discussion. Participants expressed concern that many teachers enter classrooms without sufficient preparation for classroom management or instructional responsibilities. They advocated expanding teacher training, strengthening mentoring programs, improving compensation, and restoring teaching as a highly respected profession capable of attracting talented individuals.

Participants also discussed school funding extensively. Several noted that Oklahoma has not kept pace with neighboring states in funding public education and argued that inadequate financial support affects every aspect of school operations, from class sizes and instructional materials to counselor availability and student support staff. Participants encouraged greater flexibility for local school districts while expressing concern about increasing state intervention in local decision-making.

The conversation also focused on preparing students for a variety of successful futures. While college readiness remains important, participants emphasized that schools should equally value career and technical education, workforce preparation, apprenticeships, and other career pathways. Students, they argued, should graduate prepared to enter higher education, skilled trades, military service, or the workforce with equal confidence and opportunity.

Participants discussed several external factors influencing student achievement, including mental health challenges, substance abuse, changing family dynamics, and increasing behavioral concerns. They also questioned whether younger students are spending too much time using digital devices and suggested restoring a healthier balance between technology and traditional instruction.

During discussions about community involvement, participants highlighted the important role local businesses can play by providing internships, career exploration opportunities, and real-world learning experiences. Industry representatives were encouraged to engage with schools earlier and more intentionally, helping students understand the many career opportunities available within their own communities.

Participants also stressed that public education requires broad public support. They encouraged stronger partnerships among businesses, families, and schools while expressing concern about efforts that could weaken public education through reduced funding or privatization. Throughout the discussion, participants consistently returned to the belief that strong public schools remain fundamental to Oklahoma's future workforce, economy, and quality of life.

Lawton



Lawton participants approached education from a community-wide perspective, emphasizing that student success depends upon addressing both academic instruction and the social conditions that influence learning. Participants repeatedly described education as a shared responsibility requiring collaboration among schools, families, higher education institutions, businesses, nonprofit organizations, and the military community.

Smaller class sizes emerged as one of the strongest recommendations across discussion groups. Participants believed reducing student-to-teacher ratios would allow educators to provide more individualized attention while improving classroom management and student engagement. Teacher preparation, ongoing professional development, and early intervention training for teachers, counselors, and support staff were also viewed as essential investments.

Participants discussed the importance of meeting students' basic needs before academic success can occur. Food insecurity, housing instability, behavioral challenges, childhood trauma, and family support were all identified as significant factors affecting student learning. Several groups emphasized strengthening the family unit while expanding community resources available to students and parents.

Attendance was another major concern. Participants noted declining attendance rates and stressed the importance of creating school cultures where students feel connected, welcomed, and motivated to attend each day. Reading instruction, phonics, small-group reading support, and reducing unnecessary technology use were also identified as important strategies for improving student achievement.

Participants encouraged stronger partnerships between universities and public schools to recruit more students into the teaching

profession while ensuring schools retain local flexibility to respond to community needs. School funding, facilities, and access to qualified support staff were also recurring topics throughout the discussion.

When considering the community's role, participants envisioned schools serving as community hubs where families could connect with local resources and support services. Expanding internships, including opportunities within nonprofit organizations, was viewed as a valuable way to expose students to a wider variety of careers while strengthening community connections.

Participants also recommended improving communication about available community resources, increasing family advocacy efforts, addressing truancy through coordinated community action, and strengthening relationships between schools and military families. Social media, homeschooling trends, and public perceptions of standardized testing were also discussed as factors influencing education. Overall, Lawton participants emphasized that lasting educational improvement requires coordinated community support extending well beyond the classroom.

Alva



Participants in Alva focused much of their discussion on student motivation and ensuring Oklahoma's education system recognizes that success can take many different forms. While academic achievement remained a priority, participants consistently emphasized the importance of preparing students for a variety of futures rather than measuring every student by the same standard.

Several groups discussed what they viewed as growing student apathy and declining engagement. Participants noted that many students face challenges beyond the classroom, including poverty, family responsibilities, and chronic absenteeism, all of which affect learning. They encouraged schools and communities to celebrate student successes more intentionally while creating learning environments that motivate students to reach their full potential. Participants agreed that intervention must begin early, identifying elementary school as the critical period for establishing strong academic habits, particularly in reading.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic were also evident in the discussion. Participants described increased absenteeism, reduced parent involvement, greater reliance on electronics, and fewer opportunities for students to develop strong reading habits. Several groups expressed concern that these trends continue to affect student achievement.

Career readiness generated considerable discussion. Participants supported maintaining college preparation opportunities but argued that equal emphasis should be placed on military service, CareerTech education, workforce training, and other career pathways. Several participants suggested expanding assessments beyond the ACT to include tools such as the ASVAB, allowing students to demonstrate strengths aligned with different career goals. Participants repeatedly emphasized that education should help every student become a productive contributor to society rather than expecting every graduate to follow the same educational pathway.

Participants also questioned the state's emphasis on standardized testing, expressing concern that teaching to the test often limits meaningful instruction. They encouraged evaluating students based on individual growth and effort rather than relying solely on uniform expectations that may not reflect students' differing abilities and circumstances.

When discussing the community's role, participants highlighted the importance of strengthening family engagement through after-school programs, expanded outreach efforts, and increased collaboration between schools and families. Northwestern Oklahoma State University was viewed as a valuable community resource, with participants encouraging greater involvement of student teachers in local schools to provide mentoring and innovative programming.

Career exploration opportunities were another recurring priority. Participants recommended expanding programs that allow students to explore occupations before graduation, introducing career awareness as early as middle school, and strengthening initiatives such as Upward Bound and career exploration programs. Participants also expressed concern about continued discussions surrounding reductions in public education funding, arguing that strong public schools remain essential to the future of their community.

Wilburton



Participants in Wilburton emphasized restoring focus to the fundamentals of education while strengthening support for teachers and rebuilding public confidence in Oklahoma's schools. Throughout the discussion, participants consistently returned to the importance of literacy, teacher quality,

and meaningful community involvement.

Early reading and mathematics instruction were viewed as the foundation for long-term student success. Participants expressed concern that increasing emphasis on standardized testing has shifted instructional priorities away from authentic learning, encouraging teachers to focus more heavily on test preparation than on developing lasting knowledge and critical thinking skills. Several groups advocated returning to instructional practices centered on student learning rather than accountability measures.

Teacher recruitment and retention also emerged as significant concerns. Participants described declining teacher morale, low retention rates, and growing reliance on emergency-certified educators as challenges facing schools throughout the region. They encouraged stronger teacher preparation programs, improved salaries and retirement benefits, additional professional development, and certification requirements that ensure every classroom is led by a well-prepared educator. Participants also questioned why increasing numbers of teachers are leaving the profession and encouraged state leaders to address the underlying causes.

Several groups discussed student behavior, discipline, and the importance of maintaining recess and other opportunities that support children's social and emotional development. Participants emphasized that removing opportunities for physical activity has not produced better educational outcomes and encouraged schools to consider the whole child when making instructional decisions.

Participants also stressed the importance of communication between schools and families. Stronger relationships with parents, increased one-on-one communication, and earlier intervention when attendance or academic concerns arise were viewed as essential strategies for improving student achievement.

When discussing the community's role, participants envisioned stronger partnerships between schools, businesses, parents, and civic organizations. Apprenticeship opportunities, mentoring relationships, and increased interaction between students and positive adult role models were identified as valuable ways to prepare students for future careers while strengthening community connections.

Participants also expressed concern about public understanding of school funding, particularly the financial impact of charter schools, private school tax credits, and voucher programs on traditional public schools. They encouraged communities to become more informed about education funding and to actively support local schools through volunteerism, mentoring, and advocacy. Improving awareness of available community services, increasing collaboration with law enforcement and first responders, and ensuring no child feels excluded from school activities were also identified as important priorities.

Ardmore



Ardmore participants consistently emphasized that supporting teachers and strengthening family engagement represent the greatest opportunities for improving educational outcomes. Across all discussion groups, participants recognized the dedication of educators while expressing concern that teachers are increasingly expected to meet growing academic, behavioral, and social demands without adequate support.

Technology generated one of the community's most extensive discussions. Participants generally agreed that digital tools have an important place in education but expressed concern that technology has become overly dominant in classrooms, particularly among younger students. Excessive screen time, reduced face-to-face interaction, and diminished instructional time were frequently cited as unintended consequences. Participants encouraged schools to adopt a more balanced approach that combines technology with traditional teaching methods and hands-on learning experiences.

Teacher preparation and professional support were also recurring priorities. Participants discussed concerns regarding the number of non-certified educators entering classrooms, the need for additional professional development, and the importance of attracting and retaining highly qualified teachers through competitive compensation and ongoing training. Several groups stressed that restoring public trust and confidence in educators remains essential to strengthening Oklahoma's schools.

Parent engagement emerged throughout nearly every discussion. Participants encouraged schools to create more welcoming environments that invite parents back into classrooms and increase communication between educators and families. Many believed stronger family involvement could help address student behavior, improve attendance, and reinforce the importance of education at home.

Several groups also emphasized the importance of reading proficiency during the early elementary years, recommending increased attention to PreK through third-grade literacy, targeted academic support, and reconsideration of standardized testing for younger students. Participants encouraged expanding mentorship opportunities, career exploration programs, and educational pathways that allow students to discover and pursue their individual interests and passions.

When discussing community support, participants envisioned

stronger collaboration among businesses, parents, schools, and community organizations. Career awareness, financial literacy, resource fairs, parenting workshops, and volunteer opportunities were identified as practical ways communities can contribute to student success. Participants also encouraged local businesses to adopt schools, establish teacher scholarship programs, and increase appreciation for educators and school support personnel.

Throughout the discussion, participants emphasized the importance of developing a shared community vision for education—one that defines student success broadly, values career readiness alongside academic achievement, and recognizes that preparing students for the future is a responsibility shared by the entire community.

Seminole



Participants in Seminole consistently described education as a shared responsibility that extends well beyond the classroom. While much of the discussion focused on improving instruction, participants repeatedly returned to the belief that schools cannot be expected to solve every challenge students bring with them. Instead, they advocated for stronger partnerships among educators, families, businesses, nonprofit organizations, and local governments to create an environment where every child has the opportunity to succeed.

One of the strongest themes was meeting students where they are academically and developmentally. Participants observed that classrooms today include students with increasingly diverse learning needs, including growing numbers requiring special education services, behavioral supports, mental health services, and individualized instruction. They encouraged a more diagnostic approach to education that identifies students' needs early and provides targeted interventions, particularly in reading. Early literacy was viewed as the cornerstone of future academic success, with participants emphasizing that instruction should begin at each child's current level rather than expecting all students to progress uniformly.

Participants also expressed concern about the growing emphasis on standardized testing and school rankings. Many believed accountability remains important but argued that excessive focus on testing creates unnecessary stress for students and teachers while narrowing classroom instruction. Several groups encouraged shifting attention away from test performance and toward student growth, age-appropriate learning, and overall child development. Participants also called for reducing the number of noninstructional responsibilities placed on teachers so they can devote more time to teaching and building relationships with students.

Teacher support was another recurring topic. Participants advocated for smaller class sizes, increased counselor availability, expanded administrative support, and additional professional development for both certified and emergency-certified teachers. They also emphasized the importance of providing teachers with competitive salaries and sufficient time before each school year to participate in meaningful professional learning.

Community involvement generated extensive discussion during the second question. Participants envisioned businesses serving as active educational partners through mentoring programs, internships, career fairs, and workplace experiences that expose students to future employment opportunities. Existing community initiatives such as Impact Seminole were recognized as valuable models for collaboration, and participants encouraged expanding those efforts to include more businesses, nonprofit organizations, and civic groups.

Parents were also viewed as essential partners in student success. Participants acknowledged that many parents carry negative experiences from their own school years that influence their involvement today. They encouraged rebuilding trust between schools and families through stronger communication, volunteer opportunities, and programs that help parents become more confident supporters of their children's education. Participants also recommended educating the community about available services, coordinating efforts among organizations to avoid duplication, and strengthening support for students facing chronic absenteeism.

Throughout the discussion, participants repeatedly described schools as the center of community life. They believed educational success depends not only on classroom instruction but also on community pride, positive public support for schools, and a shared commitment to preparing students for productive futures.

Edmond



Edmond participants consistently emphasized that educational excellence begins with investing in people. Across multiple discussion groups, participants identified teacher quality, student support services, and community collaboration as the most important factors influencing student

achievement. Rather than focusing on a single solution, participants described the need for a comprehensive approach that addresses academic, social, and emotional development simultaneously.

Teacher recruitment, preparation, and retention emerged as one of the community's strongest priorities. Participants advocated for attracting highly qualified educators by increasing professional respect, expanding mentoring programs for first-year teachers, and providing greater autonomy within the classroom. They argued that teachers perform best when trusted as professionals and given the flexibility to respond to individual student needs. Participants also expressed concern that teaching to standardized tests limits creativity and instructional effectiveness while placing unnecessary pressure on both educators and students.

Early childhood education was repeatedly identified as one of the greatest opportunities for long-term improvement. Participants emphasized that investing in students during their earliest years produces benefits throughout their educational journey. At the same time, they encouraged increasing staffing levels, reducing counselor-to-student ratios, and expanding wraparound services, including mental health resources and additional school counselors, to ensure students receive support beyond academics.

Several discussion groups also encouraged policymakers to reconsider traditional approaches to education. Rather than placing students into rigid categories, participants advocated for more individualized learning that recognizes students' unique strengths, interests, and learning styles. Participants also expressed concern about virtual charter schools and the impact they believe they have had on student engagement, attendance, and graduation rates.

Community discussions focused heavily on strengthening partnerships among schools, businesses, parents, and civic organizations. Participants believed employers can play a greater role by supporting employees' involvement in their children's education, allowing flexibility for parent-teacher conferences and school events, and helping schools provide wraparound services. Businesses were also encouraged to work more closely with educators to identify meaningful ways they can contribute to student success.

Communication emerged as another important theme. Participants believed many community members want to support schools but often lack clear information about how to become involved. They recommended improving public awareness of volunteer opportunities, building stronger relationships with community partners, and educating residents about how education funding supports public schools.

Participants also discussed broader cultural issues affecting education, including the tendency to value athletics more highly than academics and the perception that teachers bear sole responsibility for educational outcomes. They encouraged shifting toward a community-wide mindset in which parents, businesses, public officials, and schools collectively share responsibility for preparing Oklahoma's next generation.

Durant



Participants in Durant described education as one of Oklahoma's most important long-term investments and consistently emphasized that meaningful improvement will require stronger support for teachers, greater parent engagement, and educational systems that recognize the unique needs of every student.

Teacher preparation and workforce development dominated much of the discussion. Participants expressed concern about teacher shortages, increasing reliance on emergency-certified educators, and the need to encourage more young people to enter the teaching profession. They recommended expanding teacher preparation programs, increasing opportunities for classroom experience before certification, strengthening ongoing professional development, and improving compensation and benefits for both teachers and school support staff.

Participants also discussed the growing demands placed on educators. Classroom management, excessive academic standards, social promotion policies, and the increasing use of technology and artificial intelligence were all identified as challenges facing today's teachers. While participants recognized that standards remain important, many believed education has become overly standardized and insufficiently responsive to students' individual learning styles and interests. Several groups questioned the value of current standardized testing systems and suggested redirecting resources toward instructional improvement rather than assessment.

Parent involvement surfaced repeatedly throughout the discussion. Participants encouraged schools and communities to strengthen relationships with families by improving communication, removing barriers to participation, and helping parents become more active partners in their children's education. Grandparents and extended family members were also identified as valuable resources capable of supporting student success through reading, mentoring, and school involvement.

Mental health services, childcare, homelessness, and socioeconomic challenges were recognized as significant barriers affecting many students' ability to learn. Participants encouraged expanding support mechanisms for both students and families while increasing access to counselors, community resources, and after-school programs.

Career readiness remained another strong theme. Participants emphasized that education should prepare students for many

different futures, including college, military service, CareerTech programs, and direct workforce entry. Internships, mentorships, citizenship education, critical thinking skills, financial literacy, and early reading interventions were all viewed as essential components of a well-rounded education. Participants also encouraged balancing technological innovation with continued emphasis on independent thinking and problem-solving.

When discussing the community's role, participants envisioned businesses, civic organizations, parents, and educators working together to create stronger learning opportunities both inside and outside the classroom. They advocated for community workshops, greater volunteerism, expanded field experiences, stronger parent support groups, and increased collaboration among organizations serving children and families. Throughout the discussion, participants emphasized that improving education requires sustained investment, long-term planning, and a shared commitment from the entire community rather than relying on short-term solutions.

Central & North Tulsa



Participants in Central and North Tulsa viewed education through the broader context of community well-being, emphasizing that academic success is inseparable from family stability, mental health, and access to community resources. Throughout the discussions, participants described education as a community investment that requires coordinated support from schools, families, businesses, faith organizations, and government.

Attendance and literacy emerged as two of the community's highest priorities. Participants repeatedly noted that students cannot learn if they are not consistently in school, identifying chronic absenteeism as one of the greatest barriers to achievement. At the same time, literacy was viewed as the gateway to all future learning. Participants stressed that improving reading proficiency should remain a statewide priority, arguing that students who struggle to read face increasing challenges across every academic subject.

Mental health also generated significant discussion. Participants described behavioral health as a foundational component of student success, noting that students cannot fully engage academically when emotional and psychological needs go unmet. They encouraged expanding school-based mental health services while also strengthening wraparound supports available through community organizations. Several groups emphasized that schools cannot shoulder these responsibilities alone and called for greater collaboration among healthcare providers, nonprofit organizations, and local governments.

Teacher support and professional trust were recurring themes throughout the discussion. Participants expressed concern that educators are frequently asked to implement policies developed by individuals with limited classroom experience. They encouraged lawmakers to seek greater input from teachers and school administrators when developing education policy while reducing unfunded mandates and noninstructional responsibilities that take teachers away from student learning. Participants also advocated for increasing teacher certification opportunities and providing educators with greater flexibility to meet the needs of individual students.

Technology and artificial intelligence were also discussed as emerging issues. While recognizing the value of digital tools, participants encouraged schools to continue emphasizing critical thinking, independent problem-solving, and authentic learning experiences that prepare students for an increasingly complex world.

When discussing the community's role, participants emphasized expanding access to resources, particularly in underserved urban and rural neighborhoods where families often face food insecurity, transportation challenges, and limited educational supports. Participants encouraged simplifying processes for community organizations seeking to partner with schools and recommended developing more consistent agreements that reduce administrative barriers while protecting student safety.

Faith communities, businesses, and nonprofit organizations were viewed as important partners that can provide mentoring, school supplies, food assistance, and positive reinforcement for students. Participants also stressed the importance of promoting a more positive public narrative about public education, encouraging community leaders to highlight successes, celebrate educators, and dispel misconceptions about schools through honest and informed public conversations. Overall, participants believed improving education requires not only better schools but also healthier communities working together toward common goals.

Ponca City



Participants in Ponca City emphasized restoring public confi-

dence in education while ensuring every student has access to high-quality learning opportunities regardless of where they live. Throughout the discussions, participants advocated for stronger support of public education, increased early intervention, and a renewed commitment to academic excellence.

Early childhood education was identified as one of the greatest opportunities to improve long-term student outcomes. Participants supported expanding preschool opportunities, increasing access to early intervention programs, and identifying learning challenges before students fall behind. Smaller class sizes in the elementary grades were also viewed as essential for helping teachers build strong relationships with young learners and provide individualized instruction.

Participants expressed concern about growing dependence on technology in classrooms. Many believed students spend too much time using computers and digital devices while losing opportunities to develop critical thinking, interpersonal communication, and independent learning skills. Several groups advocated limiting classroom technology where appropriate, banning cell phones during instructional time, and encouraging students to "learn how to learn" through more traditional instructional approaches.

Teacher recruitment and retention emerged as another significant concern. Participants discussed declining respect for educators from students, parents, and the public while encouraging stronger support for teachers through improved funding, greater professional authority, and additional classroom resources. Participants also expressed concern about increasing reliance on alternatively certified teachers and emphasized the importance of providing every classroom with well-prepared educators.

School funding generated considerable discussion. Participants supported ensuring equitable funding opportunities for students across Oklahoma while cautioning against policies they believe divert resources away from traditional public schools. They also expressed concern about legislative micromanagement of local schools and encouraged greater local flexibility in addressing community needs.

Community support was viewed as essential to improving educational outcomes. Participants encouraged businesses, parents, and civic organizations to become more actively involved through mentoring, volunteerism, internships, and partnerships with schools. Strengthening PTAs, expanding prevention programs for youth, and increasing public advocacy for education were all identified as ways communities can better support students.

Several groups also emphasized shifting community priorities toward academics. While recognizing the value of athletics, participants encouraged communities to celebrate academic achievement with the same enthusiasm often reserved for sports. They believed creating a stronger culture that values education would encourage greater student engagement, stronger family involvement, and increased support from businesses and elected officials. Participants concluded that improving education begins with communities deciding that educational excellence is one of their highest priorities.

Central & South Tulsa



Participants in Central and South Tulsa focused their discussions on strengthening instructional quality while building stronger partnerships between schools and the broader community. Throughout the conversations, participants emphasized that educational success requires sustained investment in teachers, early learning, and collaborative community support.

Reading instruction emerged as one of the strongest priorities. Participants advocated renewed emphasis on phonics and foundational literacy while encouraging schools to reduce the amount of time devoted to standardized testing. Several groups suggested extending learning opportunities through longer school calendars or year-round educational models while ensuring instructional time remains focused on student learning rather than assessment.

Teacher quality and support generated significant discussion. Participants encouraged increasing the number of qualified teachers, reducing class sizes in the early grades, expanding professional development opportunities, and providing teachers with greater autonomy in the classroom. Mental health services for both students and educators were also viewed as increasingly important, particularly as schools respond to growing behavioral and emotional challenges among students.

Participants discussed the importance of strengthening the connection between state education policy and local classroom implementation. While acknowledging the role of state leadership, they consistently emphasized that local educators remain best positioned to understand the needs of their students and communities. Improved data systems, better training, and increased respect for teachers' professional judgment were viewed as essential for continued improvement.

The second discussion centered on rebuilding partnerships between schools and their communities. Participants expressed interest in reviving trusted volunteer programs, expanding community schools, and creating more opportunities for businesses, churches, nonprofit organizations, and parents to become actively involved in education. They also encouraged schools to improve communication and make it easier for community members to volunteer, mentor students, and share professional expertise within classrooms.

Career readiness was another recurring theme. Participants supported introducing career exploration opportunities during middle school, expanding internships, strengthening business partnerships, and helping students understand the wide range of educational and career pathways available after graduation. Transportation, attendance, and safe routes to school were also identified as practical issues communities can help address.

Several groups emphasized that elections and public policy decisions have long-term impacts on education. Participants encouraged greater civic engagement, stronger public understanding of school funding, and increased community ownership of educational success. Throughout the discussion, participants described education as a shared responsibility requiring coordinated planning, sustained investment, and collaboration among schools, families, businesses, and public leaders.

Claremore



Participants in Claremore consistently emphasized that improving education requires restoring balance between the responsibilities of schools, families, and communities. While recognizing the tremendous work performed by educators, participants argued that schools have increasingly been asked to address challenges traditionally managed by families and community organizations.

Teacher support emerged as one of the strongest themes throughout the discussions. Participants advocated increasing professional development opportunities, strengthening classroom management authority, expanding counselor and social worker support, and restoring greater respect for the teaching profession. They also encouraged state policymakers to allow sufficient time for schools to implement new initiatives before introducing additional policy changes, noting that constant change creates challenges for educators and administrators alike.

Participants discussed the growing impact of student mental health needs and family instability on classroom learning. Many believed children often arrive at school unprepared to learn because of circumstances beyond educators' control, including poverty, family stress, behavioral challenges, and unmet mental health needs. Participants emphasized that teachers should not be expected to function as mental health professionals without additional support from counselors, social workers, and community agencies.

Another significant discussion centered on recognizing that students learn differently. Participants advocated for individualized learning pathways, expanded internship opportunities, and work-based learning experiences that allow students to explore careers while completing high school. Rather than expecting every student to follow identical educational pathways, participants encouraged schools to recognize diverse talents, interests, and future goals.

Community discussions focused heavily on rebuilding collaboration among parents, businesses, nonprofit organizations, churches, and schools. Participants encouraged expanding mentoring programs, increasing private-sector involvement, improving communication about available community resources, and helping parents better navigate educational systems and available services. Childcare, parenting education, wraparound services, and educational navigation assistance were all identified as practical ways communities can support families.

Participants also stressed that improving education requires positive public leadership. Community leaders, school board members, businesses, and elected officials were encouraged to support educators publicly, strengthen community partnerships, and work collaboratively rather than allowing political divisions to undermine confidence in public education. Ultimately, participants believed educational success depends upon communities accepting shared responsibility for helping every child succeed.

Owasso



Participants in Owasso consistently called for a return to educational fundamentals while restoring greater trust in teachers and increasing family engagement. Throughout the discussions, participants emphasized that strong relationships among educators, parents, and students remain the foundation of successful schools.

Reading instruction emerged as one of the community's highest priorities. Participants encouraged schools to identify reading difficulties as early as first grade and provide interventions before students begin falling behind academically. Several groups advocated placing more physical books into students' hands, believing traditional reading experiences remain essential for developing literacy, comprehension, and critical thinking skills. While acknowledging the value of technology, participants expressed concern that excessive screen time has reduced opportunities for students to engage with books and participate in hands-on learning experiences.

Participants also discussed the growing influence of standardized

testing on classroom instruction. Many believed accountability remains important but argued that testing has increasingly driven curriculum decisions and limited teachers' flexibility to meet the unique needs of their students. Participants encouraged restoring greater professional autonomy so educators can focus on instruction rather than preparing students primarily for assessments.

Teacher recruitment and retention generated significant discussion. Participants emphasized the importance of supporting educators through stronger administrative leadership, improved classroom discipline, and increased public respect for the teaching profession. Several groups observed that teachers often face restrictions that make classroom management more difficult while limiting their ability to respond effectively to student behavior. Participants consistently advocated allowing teachers to teach while providing the authority and support necessary to maintain productive learning environments.

Attendance and chronic absenteeism were also identified as ongoing concerns. Participants encouraged stronger collaboration between schools and families to improve attendance while recognizing that many students face challenges beyond the classroom that affect their ability to learn.

When discussing the community's role, participants emphasized that successful schools require active participation from parents, businesses, and community organizations. Several groups encouraged schools to invite parents back into classrooms, expand volunteer opportunities, and strengthen programs such as WATCH D.O.G.S. (Dads of Great Students), which encourages fathers and father figures to become more visible within schools. Business partnerships, social media outreach, and intentional efforts to create a positive culture around education were also viewed as important ways to strengthen community engagement.

Participants repeatedly stressed that communities should celebrate education with the same enthusiasm often shown for athletics. They encouraged residents to attend school events, volunteer their time, mentor students, and publicly support educators. Above all, participants believed educational success depends upon a community culture that values learning, expects excellence, and shares responsibility for preparing the next generation.

Altus



Participants in Altus focused much of their discussion on strengthening foundational learning during the earliest years of a child's education while providing greater support for both families and teachers. Across multiple discussion groups, participants emphasized that waiting until third grade to address learning challenges is simply too late.

Reading proficiency was consistently identified as the community's highest academic priority. Participants advocated earlier intervention, expanded reading support beginning in kindergarten and first grade, and increased availability of reading specialists before students reach third grade. Several groups expressed concern that current retention policies intervene too late to maximize student success and encouraged identifying struggling readers much earlier in their educational journey.

Student behavior and classroom discipline also emerged as recurring concerns. Participants discussed the increasing challenges teachers face managing student behavior while maintaining effective learning environments. Many believed schools need stronger partnerships with families to reinforce expectations for attendance, behavior, and personal responsibility. Several groups emphasized that schools cannot replace parents and encouraged communities to provide parenting classes and educational workshops that help families support children's development both academically and socially.

Technology generated considerable discussion as well. Participants expressed concern that students, particularly in the early grades, have become overly dependent on digital devices. While recognizing technology's instructional value, participants encouraged reducing screen time, increasing direct teacher interaction, and restoring greater emphasis on reading, writing, and hands-on learning experiences.

Teacher quality remained another significant theme. Participants discussed shortages of certified teachers, the need for additional professional training, and continued support for educators entering the profession. They also questioned whether traditional college entrance exams such as the ACT remain appropriate measures of success for every student, encouraging schools to recognize multiple pathways to achievement through CareerTech education, workforce preparation, military service, and life skills development.

Participants also advocated expanding instruction in financial literacy and practical life skills beginning in the elementary grades. They believed students should graduate with not only academic knowledge but also the skills necessary to manage finances, communicate effectively, and become responsible citizens.

During discussions about community involvement, participants emphasized the importance of strengthening partnerships among schools, parents, businesses, and civic organizations. Volunteer reading programs, parenting workshops, mentoring opportunities, internships, after-school programs, and backpack food initiatives were all identified as valuable community supports. Participants also encouraged local businesses and the Chamber of Commerce to become more actively involved in education by helping students develop workplace skills and explore career opportunities.

Throughout the discussion, participants repeatedly emphasized that education should become one of the community's highest priorities. While recognizing the importance of athletics, they encouraged placing equal or greater value on academic achieve-

ment, literacy, and lifelong learning. Participants believed strong schools require strong communities working together to support students long before they enter the classroom and throughout their educational journey.

Pryor



Participants in Pryor consistently described education as a community responsibility built upon collaboration, positive relationships, and shared investment in children. Throughout the discussions, participants emphasized that successful schools are created not only through effective classroom instruction but also through coordinated support from families, businesses, community organizations, and state leaders.

Attendance emerged as one of the community's strongest concerns. Participants noted that consistent attendance forms the foundation for student success and encouraged communities to adopt an "it takes a village" approach to supporting children and families. Building strong relationships between teachers and students, ensuring every child feels valued, and creating welcoming school environments were all viewed as important strategies for improving both attendance and academic achievement.

Participants also emphasized returning to educational fundamentals. Reading instruction, phonics, soft skills development, and reducing unnecessary reliance on technology were identified as priorities. Several groups advocated increasing family involvement in reading at home while encouraging schools to strengthen communication with parents about student progress and available support services. Screening students earlier for academic and behavioral challenges was also recommended to ensure interventions occur before students begin falling behind.

Teacher recruitment and retention generated significant discussion. Participants expressed concern about teacher shortages, emergency certification, and educator compensation while encouraging greater state investment in teacher support, counseling services, childcare, workforce development programs, and family assistance initiatives. They also discussed restoring universal meal programs and expanding social services that help students arrive at school prepared to learn.

When discussing community involvement, participants repeatedly highlighted Pryor's strong tradition of collaboration. Businesses, industries, schools, and community organizations were praised for working together to support education, and participants encouraged expanding apprenticeship opportunities, career pathways, after-school programs, and volunteer initiatives. Local industries were viewed as particularly valuable partners capable of exposing students to career opportunities while helping strengthen the region's future workforce.

Housing affordability also emerged as an important educational issue. Participants recognized that housing instability contributes to student mobility and homelessness, creating additional challenges for schools and families. They encouraged communities to support affordable housing initiatives while educating residents about the potential impact of public policy decisions on school funding.

Throughout the discussion, participants stressed the importance of maintaining a positive public narrative about education. Celebrating student success, recognizing school accomplishments, encouraging civic participation, and promoting informed voting were all viewed as ways to strengthen community confidence in public education. Participants believed that when communities publicly celebrate their schools and work together toward common goals, students benefit both inside and outside the classroom.

CONCLUSION

The 2026 Oklahoma Academy Community Town Halls demonstrated that, while every Oklahoma community faces unique circumstances, the priorities expressed across the state were remarkably consistent. Whether participants gathered in large metropolitan areas or small rural communities, discussions repeatedly centered on strengthening the teaching profession, increasing family engagement, improving early literacy, expanding mental health and student support services, reducing barriers to learning, and building stronger partnerships between schools and their communities.

Participants also consistently expressed concern about Oklahoma's current accountability system. While communities did not identify a single solution, many questioned whether existing measures, including the emphasis placed on standardized testing and the state school report card, accurately reflect student learning, educator effectiveness, or the overall quality of a school. Across the state, participants encouraged a thoughtful examination of how schools are evaluated to ensure accountability systems better support student success, recognize student growth, and promote continuous improvement.

Perhaps the strongest message heard throughout these conversations was that improving education is a shared responsibility. Participants recognized that schools cannot solve every challenge alone. Families, businesses, community organizations, faith communities, higher education, Tribal governments, and policymakers all have important roles to play in creating an environment where every student can succeed. Improving educational outcomes will require sustained collaboration, mutual trust, and a willingness to work together across traditional boundaries.

The ideas shared during these Community Town Halls provide an important foundation for the 2026 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall. They reflect the experiences of Oklahomans from communities across the state and will help guide the Academy's consensus-building process as participants work together to develop practical, forward-looking recommendations that strengthen Oklahoma's education system and expand opportunities for every student.

Section 1

The State of Education

Before HB 1017: The Oklahoma Academy's Early Push to Modernize Education

Town Hall Research Committee

Nearly four decades ago, Oklahomans were asking many of the same fundamental questions about public education that confront the state today.

In November 1988, more than 500 Oklahomans gathered for the Oklahoma Academy for State Goals' fourth annual conference. Its title was deliberately provocative: "Elementary and Secondary Education: Will Oklahoma Pass or Fail?"

The conference brought educators, business leaders, parents, policymakers and citizens together to examine Oklahoma's public schools from preschool through high school. The resulting consensus recommendations addressed curriculum, student assessment, teachers, funding, school governance, technology and the organization of schools.

The Academy was not alone in calling for change. Oklahoma was entering a period of intense examination of its education system that would eventually produce one of the most consequential education reform efforts in state history.

A System Built for a Changing World

Reading the Academy's 1988 recommendations today is striking because many were not simply about spending more money. Participants were asking a larger question: Was the structure of Oklahoma education keeping pace with the needs of students and the changing world around them?

The Academy called for a statewide core curriculum built around the knowledge and skills students would need in the 21st century. Those skills included reading, writing, computing, critical thinking, Oklahoma and U.S. history, and familiarity with emerging technologies. At the same time, participants cautioned against allowing minimum standards to become ceilings on student achievement.

The Academy also envisioned a much stronger early childhood system. Its long-term recommendation was publicly supported preschool for all children beginning no later than age 4, with an immediate emphasis on children considered most at risk. It called for standards to ensure program quality, coordination among providers and better integration between preschool and the K–12 system.

Teachers were central to the discussion. The recommendations called for stronger preparation and evaluation standards, opportunities for teachers to participate in developing those standards, career ladders that would allow excellent teachers to advance without leaving the classroom, stronger administrator preparation and increased teacher compensation.



PAST TOWN HALLS

We've Been Here Before

But perhaps some of the most forward-looking recommendations concerned how schools themselves operated.

The Academy argued that successful schools should have greater freedom from prescriptive state rules. It called for more authority to be placed at the school-building level, greater flexibility for local schools to design instruction around community needs, experimental programs for nontraditional school organizations and consideration of magnet schools, open enrollment, alternative schools and school choice. The report described central offices as potentially becoming "service centers," while individual schools were given greater responsibility for meeting state objectives.

Technology was also emerging as an important part of the conversation. The Academy recommended that Oklahoma become a national leader in educational technology, specifically mentioning computer-assisted learning and other technologies that were cutting edge for the late 1980s.

The technology has changed dramatically since then. The underlying question has not: How should schools adapt when the world students are preparing to enter changes faster than the system educating them?

From Academy Discussion to Task Force 2000

The conversation did not end with the conference.

In 1989, education reform moved to the center of Oklahoma's public policy agenda through Task Force 2000, a group of citizens and educators chaired by Tulsa business-

man George Singer, who was also a member of the Oklahoma Academy's board.

Task Force 2000 developed a sweeping package of recommendations focused on higher academic standards, a longer school year, increased teacher salaries and a more equitable system for financing schools.

Singer brought that message directly to the Oklahoma Academy.

Speaking before approximately 375 people at the Academy's 1989 annual conference, he challenged state leaders to think beyond incremental change. His message was ambitious: Oklahoma could become a national leader in education by 2000 if lawmakers were willing to make comprehensive reforms rather than adopt isolated pieces of the proposal.

The work of Task Force 2000 helped shape the debate that culminated in House Bill 1017, Oklahoma's landmark 1990 education reform law.

Yet the people involved understood that passing legislation was not the same thing as completing reform.

Reform Requires Follow-Through

By 1993, Task Force 2000 was reconvened at the request of legislative leaders, this time not to launch another sweeping reform package but to evaluate Oklahoma's progress under HB 1017.

Its charge included examining core curriculum, teacher and administrator compensation and incentives, student achievement, student mobility, dropout rates, alternatives to the traditional classroom, gifted and talented education, and how student progress was reported to the public.

The discussion also expanded into areas that sound remarkably familiar today.

Participants questioned whether state regulation was inhibiting innovation. They debated whether uniform student-teacher ratios made sense for every classroom. They called for greater investment in educational technology. They questioned whether high schools were placing too much emphasis on college-bound students and too little on career and technical pathways. They discussed parental responsibility, community involvement, school choice, school safety and early childhood education.

In other words, Oklahoma's education debate was already moving beyond the question of how much the state invested in schools toward questions about how schools were organized, what students learned, how teachers were supported and how success should be measured.

The Conversation Comes Full Circle

That history provides important context for the 2026 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall, Challenges to Change: Shaping Tomorrow's Classrooms.

The purpose of revisiting this history is not to suggest that recommendations made in 1988 or 1989 provide the answers for Oklahoma in 2026. The state has changed. Its students have changed. Technology, the economy, the workforce and the expectations placed on schools have changed dramatically.

But the history demonstrates something important about the Oklahoma Academy's role.

The Academy has long provided a place where Oklahomans can examine education as a system, rather than as a collection of isolated problems. Its 1988 participants considered preschool, curriculum, teachers, assessment, governance, funding, technology and local flexibility together because changes in one part of education inevitably affect the others. The conference report itself argued that education reform, improvement and funding needed to remain at the forefront of Oklahoma's public discussion.

Nearly four decades later, Oklahoma is again asking fundamental questions about the design of its PreK–12 system.

How should the school day and school year be structured? What should students learn, and how should learning connect to college, careers and life after graduation? How can Oklahoma attract, prepare and retain excellent educators? What responsibilities belong with the state, districts, schools, families and communities? How should technology reshape teaching and learning? And, ultimately, how should Oklahoma define student success?

Those questions belong to a different generation of Oklahomans.

But they continue a conversation the Oklahoma Academy helped begin decades ago.

The task of the 2026 Town Hall is not to recreate the reforms of 1990. It is to do what Academy participants did then: look carefully at the system Oklahoma has, consider the system its students will need and determine what changes can move the state from challenges to solutions.

Read the Oklahoma Academy's 1988 education consensus recommendations at: *https://okacademy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/95-Elementary-Secondary-Education-Will-Ok-Pass-Fail-1.pdf* .

Education Rankings by the Numbers

Town Hall Research Chair Craig Knutson

Almost 11 months ago to the day, the Oklahoma State Chamber Commerce held a forum unveiling new strategies to improve educational outcomes in the state. This wasn't the first time the State Chamber, or for that matter, any number of private and public entities, have pursued this tract. Why so many entities and for so many years?

As the tables below clearly reveal, Oklahoma's K-12 educational outcomes are (and have been for quite some time) abysmal. That's not the Academy's "opinion," it is a clear statement of fact. What was so reassuring about the forum was not that an historically conservative business organization made such a pronouncement, but that they had specific recommendations that their board and legislative lobbyists plan to pursue. Bravo, but it will take more than their membership and lobbyists to achieve their goals, which elevates the importance of what "educational outcomes" we generate at this Town Hall.

With the exception of the first table and the final four tables, all metrics display the national rankings for the highlighted states. As I have done in the past, I compare OKLAHOMA to our geographic region as well as the two states that finished at the top and the bottom of the rankings.

The first table – The Nation's Report Card – Oklahoma ranks sixth of the seven regional states with the exception of 4th Grade Math, where we placed 5th, ahead of Arkansas and New Mexico. Massachusetts was top ranked in all four categories and New Mexico was lowest ranked in all four categories. Regionally, only Colorado was able to exceed the national average in all four categories.

The second table on Public School Quality showed similar findings, although Oklahoma ranked a very strong 9th nationally for safety-related issues in our system. Otherwise, the regional and national rankings mirrored Reading and Math score rankings.

The next four tables come from four different sources, highlighting different aspects of quality and outcome. Systems on the east coast and upper Midwest top the charts, with Oklahoma and New Mexico lagging significantly behind.

The 2025 Kids Count data, covering four major topic areas, is followed by the Overall Child Wellbeing table, concluding and summarizing their analysis. As with most of the tables, Colorado and Kansas outperform their regional competitors.

The last four tables reveal how Oklahoma compares in key inputs and outcomes: Per Pupil Expenditures, Drop Out Rates, Pupil: Teacher Ratios, and H.S. Graduation Rates. Again, east coast states dominate the top and southern states dominate the bottom.

While each table source uses different methodologies, weightings, and metrics, the trend is not reassuring. Data is a reflection of policies and investments made . . . or NOT MADE. The Town Hall process was developed to discuss and debate WHAT policies and investments can change trajectories for the better; use the above findings as a reflection of where we are, NOT where we WANT to be. Focus on the evidence-based policies and subsequent investments we as a state/individual communities need to make to reverse those downward leading trajectories.

As a freshman in college, I had a literature professor who once walked into the classroom, wrote two words on the blackboard, reminded us of the essay that was due next week, and then walked out. The two words: ESCHEW OBFUSCATION. So, one last reminder. When making recommendations, avoid the flowery, vague statement and focus on clarity and specificity when you can. I think that professor was on to something quite important for 18 year olds to either remember or adopt!

Table 1: National Assessment of Educational Progress: since 1969, the largest nationally representative assessment. The Nation's Report Card: State Profiles (2024); nces.ed.gov.

State	Reading	Reading	Math	Math
	4th Grade	8th Grade	4th Grade	8th Grade
Arkansas	210	255	230	266
Colorado	221	265	239	278
Kansas	213	255	237	274
Missouri	212	255	235	270
NewMexico	201	245	224	256
OKLAHOMA	207	249	233	264
Texas	212	252	241	269
National Avweage	214	257	237	272

Table 2: World Population Review, By State 2026; Public School Quality By State; worldpopulationreview.com.

	Overall Performance	Academic Performance	Resources Performance	Safety Performance
New York	1st		1st	
Massachusetts		1st		
New Jersey				1st
Arkansas	38	33	34	39
Kansas	27	11	37	37
Colorado	25	28	26	18
Missouri	23	14	32	22
New Mwxico	46	49	27	50
OKLAHOMA	47	44	49	9
Texas	34	30	45	7
Arizona	50			
Alaska		50	50	

Table 3: Educational Quality; District Administration; districtadministration.com.

Massachusetts	1
Colorado	9
Kansas	24
Texas	31
Missouri	33
Arkansas	36
OKLAHOMA	48
New Mexico	50

Table 4: US News; Best States for Education; us-news.com

Iowa/Nebraska/Vermont	1
Kansas	15
Missouri	32
Arkansas	38
Colorado	39
New Mexico	41
OKLAHOMA	42
Texas	50

Table 5: Wallet Hub: States with the Best and Worst School Systems 2026; wallethub.com.

Massachusetts	1
Colorado	28
Texas	32
Kansas	33
Arkansas	34
Missouri	38
OKLAHOMA	50
New Mexico	51

Table 6: Educational Attainment By State 2021; US Census Bureau; census.gov

Massachusetts	1	47.3
Colorado	2	45.7
Kansas	21	35.6
Texas	27	27
Missouri	32	32.4
NewMexico	40	31
OKLAHOMA	44	28.3
Arkansas	48	25.7
W Virginia	50	24.1

Table 7: Kids Count 2025; Economic Well-Being; Annie E Casey Foundation; aecf.org

New Hampshire	1
Kansas	5
Missouri	15
Colorado	21
OKLAHOMA	30
Arkansas	33
Texas	41
New Mexico	47
Louisiana	50

Table 8: Kids Count 2025; Education.

New Jersey	1
Colorado	8
Kansas	23
Texas	28
Missouri	29
Arkansas	40
OKLAHOMA	48
NewMexico	50

Table 9: Kids Count 2025; Health.

New Hampshire	1
Colorado	24
Kansas	25
Missouri	34
OKLAHOMA	37
New Mexico	41
Texas	47
Arkansas	48
Mississippi	50

Table 10: Kids Count 2025; Family and Community.

New Hampshire	1
Colorado	13
Kansas	27
Missouri	27
OKLAHOMA	43
Arkansas	45
Texas	47
New Mexico	50

Table 11 Kids Count 2025; Overall Child Well-Being.

New Hampshire	1
Colorado	14
Kansas	14
Missouri	28
Arkansas	43
Texas	44
OKLAHOMA	44
New Mexico	49
Mississippi	50

KIDS COUNT 2025 KEY NATIONAL FINDINGS

- **Child Poverty:** 16% of children (over 11 million kids) live in poverty.
- **Housing Costs:** Nearly 1 in 3 children live in households with high housing costs.
- **Health Insurance:** 95% of children have health insurance coverage.
- **Education Decline:** Reading and math proficiency rates declined, and chronic absenteeism remains high.
- **Focus Area:** The 2025 report highlights the national lack of affordable, accessible child care.

OKLAHOMA RANKINGS

- **Overall Rank:** 46th out of all U.S. states.
- **Economic Well-Being:** 40th
- **Family and Community:** 40th
- **Health:** 43rd
- **Education:** 48th

Table 12: Education Data Initiative; Per Pupil Public K-12 Spending

New York	$	30,012
New Mexico	$	17,844
Colorado	$	15,897
Kansas	$	14,847
Missouri	$	14,241
Arkansas	$	13,873
Texas	$	12,444
OKLAHOMA	$	12,162
Idaho	$	11,056

Table 13: Statspanda.com, 2022 Drop Out Rates (%)

Drop Out Rates % (2022)	statspanda.com
Rhode Islland	1.1
Arkansas	3.1
Colorado	2.4
Kansas	2.2
Missouri	3
New Mexico	4.1
OKLAHOMA	3.1
Texas	3
New Mexioco	4.1
US Average	2.5

Table 14: NCES, 2023-24 Pupil:Teacher Ratios

Pupil-Teacher Ratios	2023-24
Maine	11.3
Arkansas	12.5
Colorado	16.1
Kansas	13
Missouri	12.8
New Mexico	14.4
OKLAHOMA	16.3
Texas	14.7
Arizona	22.7
US Average	15.2

Table 15. World Population Review, 2024 H.S Graduation Rates

H.S. Graduation Rates	2024
Vermont	94.9
Arkansas	88.7
Colorado	92.9
Kansas	92
Missouri	91.9
New Mexico	88
OKLAHOMA	89.4
Texas	86
California	84.7

"It takes a person experienced at using data to know how to use it to guide instruction. We need this data to monitor growth and improve results for all of our students."

Dr. Keith Ballard

2025-2026 Oklahoma Public Education Overview and Key Trends

Oklahoma State Department of Education



INTRODUCTION

Oklahoma's education system serves as a cornerstone of the state, reflecting both its communities and its commitment to preparing students for the future. This report offers a clear look at how our PK–12 system is evolving to meet the needs of students, families, and educators.

Inside, you'll find insights into the changing demographics of our student population, the diverse pathways teachers take into the profession, and the investments that make Oklahoma's teacher compensation regionally competitive. The data also highlights how school finance has shifted over the past decade, how student support systems are adapting to challenges like absenteeism, and how academic outcomes such as early literacy and math readiness point the way toward future priorities.

To make this report even more accessible, each page includes a QR code that readers can scan to explore additional resources, interactive data, and deeper context behind the numbers.

Our goal is to provide an honest, accessible picture of where Oklahoma education stands today. By understanding the structures, the resources, and the outcomes shaping our schools, we can better plan for tomorrow and ensure that every child has the opportunity to learn, to grow, and to thrive.

Lindel Fields



Town Hall Editor's Note: You can find the full report along with the QR Codes at: file:///Users/designer/Downloads/OSDE_Fast_Facts_Condensed_Handout.pdf .

SCHOOL STRUCTURE

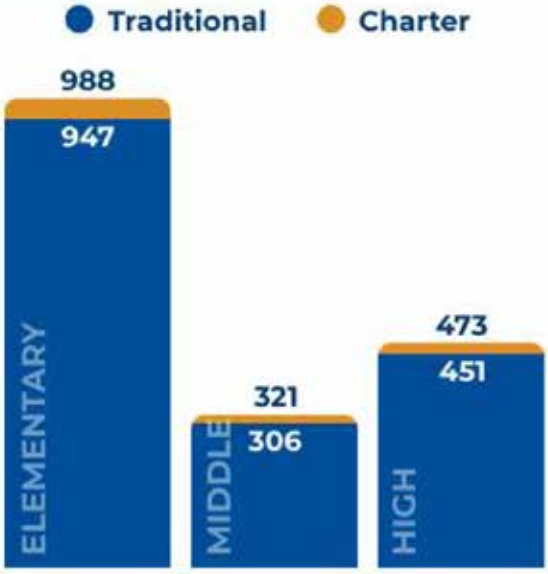
Oklahoma's PK–12 system spans 77 counties and includes both traditional and charter schools. The state's comparatively high number of districts reflects longstanding local governance traditions and a geographically dispersed population. About 60% of Oklahoma public schools are classified as rural, compared with roughly one quarter of public schools nationally. Together, these structural features shape staffing patterns, funding distribution, transportation needs, and service delivery statewide.

541 DISTRICTS

Traditional vs Charter Districts







Number of Schools Sites by Type

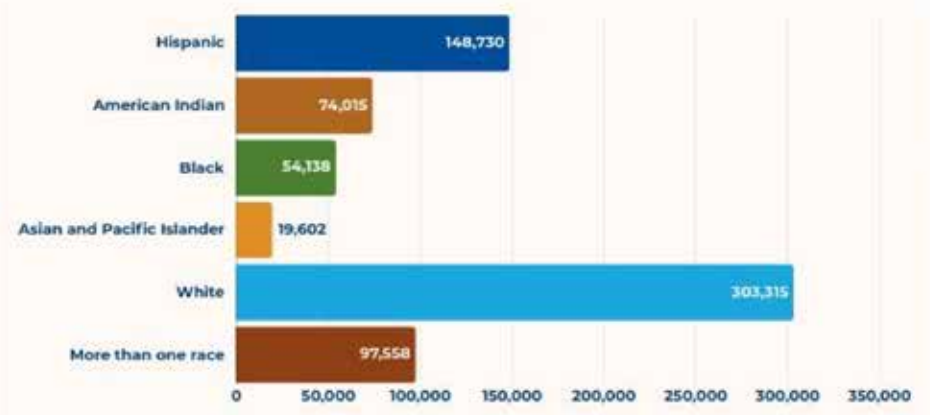
Understanding Oklahoma's structural landscape provides context for staffing patterns, funding distribution, and student experiences statewide, ensuring fair resource allocation to meet the needs of all students across diverse communities.

STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS







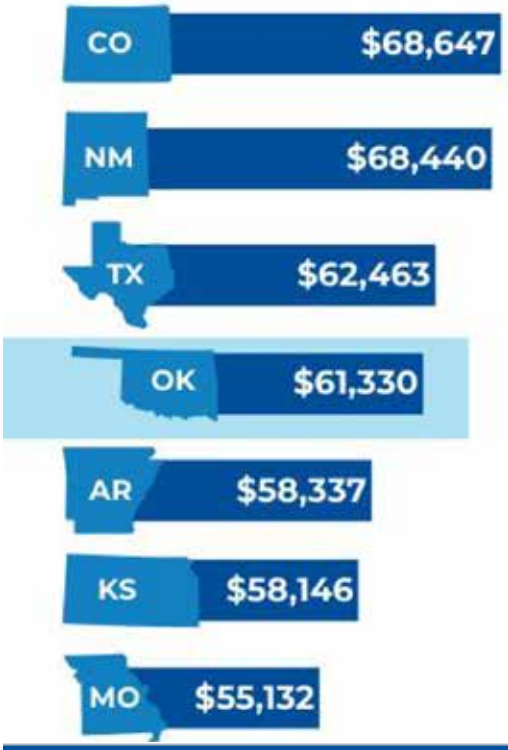




Changing student demographics influence instructional planning and resource needs. Research shows English Learners and students with disabilities require additional supports and targeted interventions to thrive. Clear demographic data help schools, districts, and state leaders align resources with student needs and position all Oklahoma students for success.

TEACHER COMPENSATION

COMPENSATION AVERAGES BY STATE

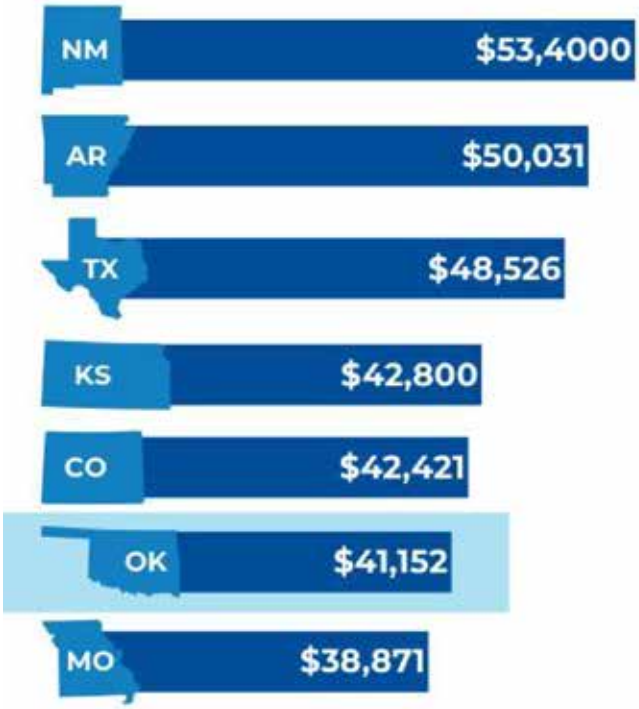


COST-OF-LIVING ADJUSTED AVERAGE SALARY*



TEACHER COMPENSATION

FIRST YEAR SALARY AVERAGE COMPARISON BY STATE



COST-OF-LIVING ADJUSTED FIRST YEAR SALARY AVERAGE COMPARISON BY STATE*



TEACHER COMPENSATION

Oklahoma's average teacher compensation is regionally competitive. However, while average salaries are competitive with neighboring states, starting teacher pay remains lower than both the regional and national averages. Evaluating both entry-level and overall compensation provides a more complete picture of teacher pay and its implications for recruitment and retention.



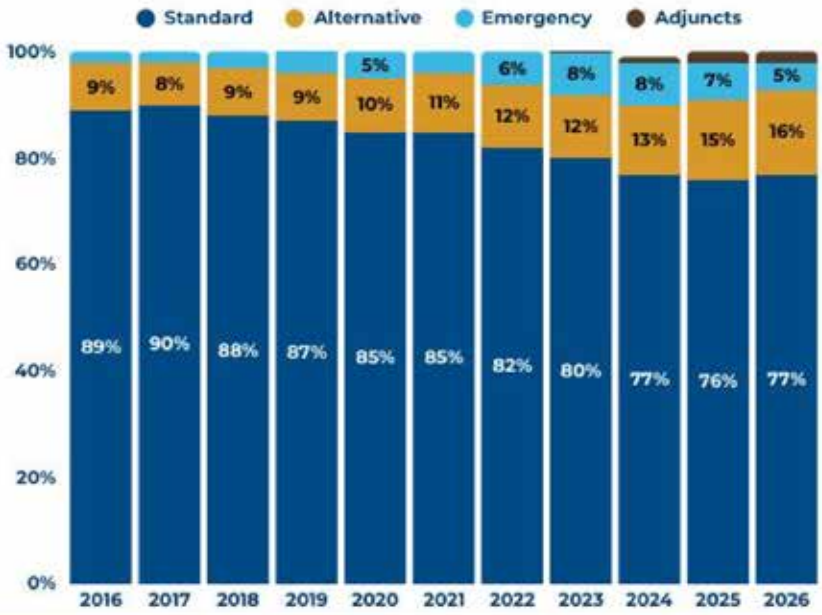
FIRST YEAR SALARY

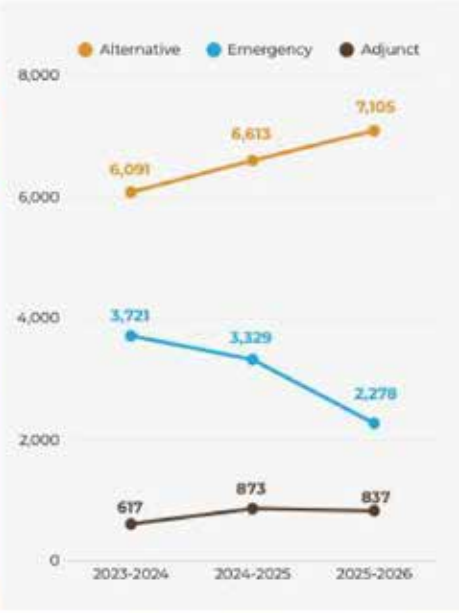


Competitive compensation is a key tool in addressing persistent teacher shortages. National research shows that targeted incentives in shortage subject areas or hard-to-staff schools can further strengthen recruitment and retention. Continued investment helps Oklahoma support a strong, stable educator workforce across communities.

TEACHER CERTIFICATION PATHWAYS

Oklahoma uses multiple certification pathways—including standard, alternative, emergency, and adjunct to help districts staff classrooms and meet student needs.



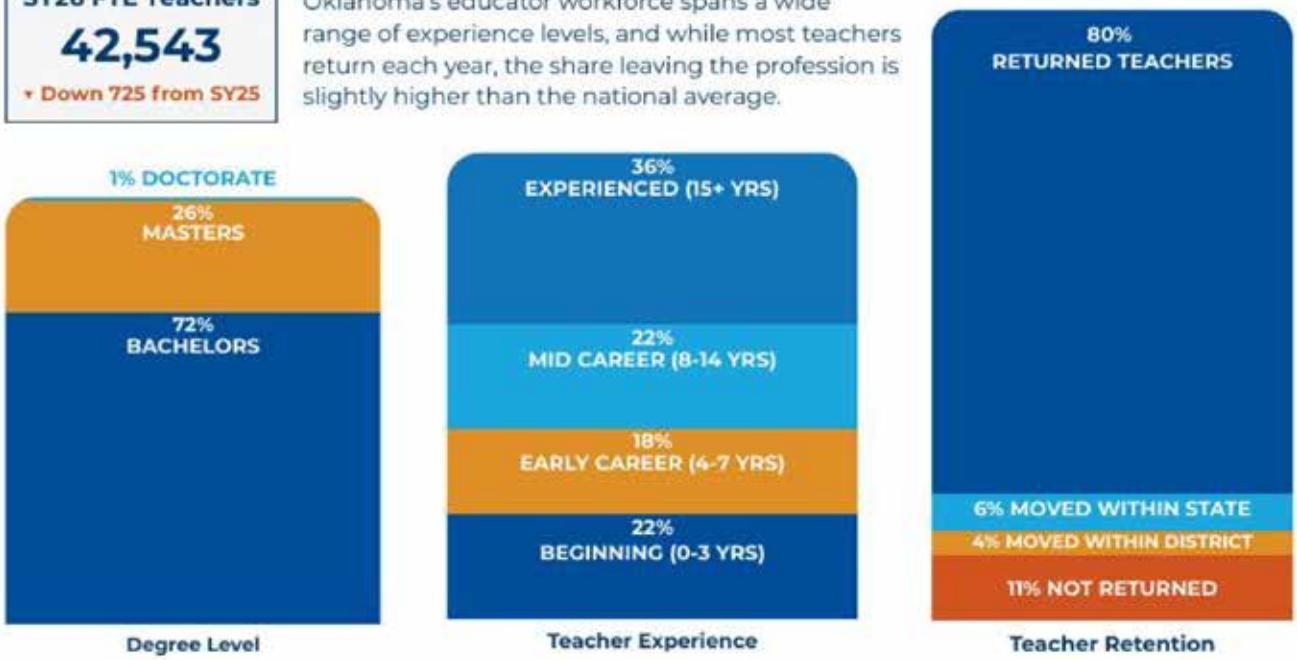


Emergency and adjunct certifications have steadily increased over the past decade, reaching 7% of the teacher workforce in 2025. While these pathways provide flexibility, research highlights the importance of strong preparation and mentoring for teachers entering through non-traditional routes. Tracking these trends supports thoughtful planning for Oklahoma's teacher pipeline.

TEACHER WORKFORCE

SY26 FTE Teachers
42,543
▼ Down 725 from SY25

Oklahoma's educator workforce spans a wide range of experience levels, and while most teachers return each year, the share leaving the profession is slightly higher than the national average.



Teacher quality is the most important school-based factor affecting student learning. Above-average attrition means Oklahoma has opportunities to improve retention, especially for early-career teachers and in hard-to-staff schools. Understanding patterns in turnover, and support can guide efforts to recruit, develop, and retain effective teachers.

SCHOOL FINANCE

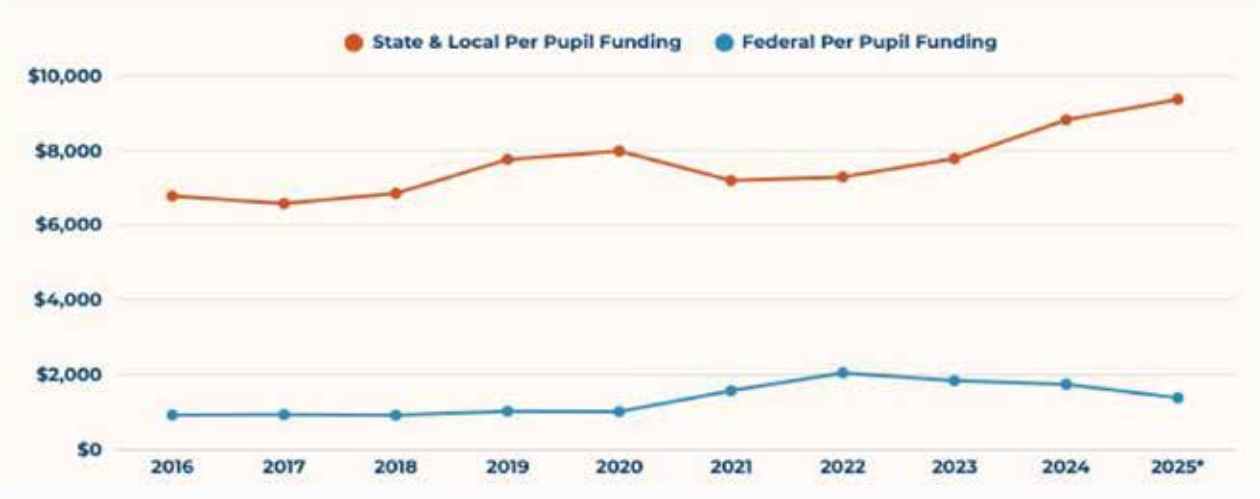
Per-pupil expenditures in Oklahoma have increased by about 50% over the past decade, with a modest shift toward non-instructional spending alongside rising operational and student support costs.



In 2024, Oklahoma's per-pupil expenditures trailed regional peers such as TX ($12,423), AR ($13,061), MO ($13,586), KS ($14,901), FL ($13,584), NM ($15,183) and MS ($12,490). Research shows that while overall funding levels matter, there is not a clear relationship between higher statewide PPE and stronger student outcomes. Instead, impacts depend on how dollars are used within schools, with investments in areas such as early literacy, high-need student supports, and evidence-based instructional practices leading to the most improved outcomes.

SCHOOL FINANCE

Per-pupil funding has increased over the past decade. Federal COVID relief created a significant funding spike in recent years that is now trailing off. State funding also saw a notable increase in 2023–24, reflecting recent legislative investments.

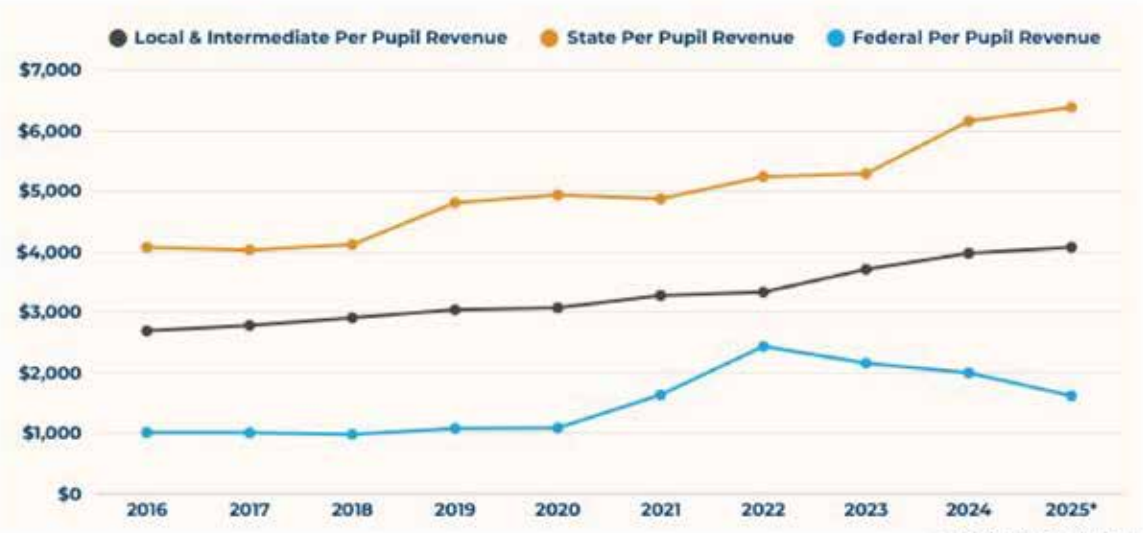


*2025 data are preliminary.

Oklahoma's funding structure reflects a shared-responsibility model among local communities, the state, and federal partners. Revenue levels shift as local property values change, state appropriations vary, and federal programs expand or expire. Recent state investments and temporary federal relief contributed to short-term increases in available resources. Understanding how these sources interact helps leaders plan budgets, anticipate needs, and maintain financial stability for schools.

SCHOOL FINANCE

Oklahoma's K–12 system is funded primarily through state revenue, with additional support from local and intermediate sources and federal aid. Per-pupil revenue has increased over the past decade. State funding also saw a notable increase in 2023–24, reflecting recent legislative investments.

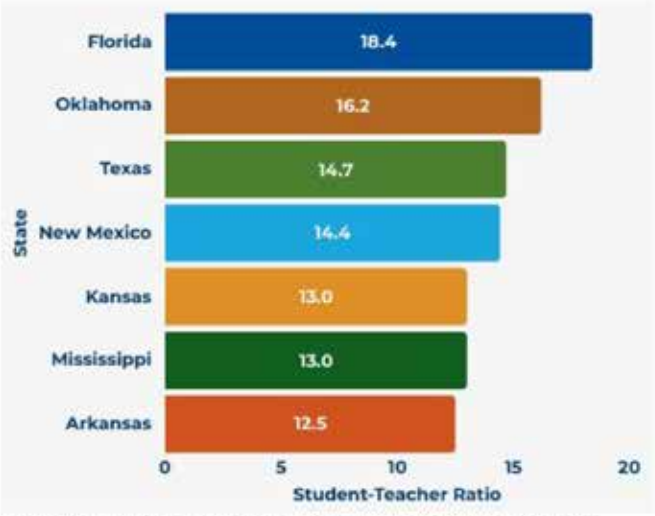


*2025 data are preliminary.

Oklahoma's funding structure reflects a shared-responsibility model among local communities, the state, and federal partners. Temporary federal relief contributed to short-term increases in available resources, but those funds have now declined. Understanding how these sources interact helps leaders plan budgets, anticipate needs, and maintain financial stability for schools.

STUDENT SUPPORT & ENGAGEMENT

Oklahoma's student–teacher ratio (16.2:1) is slightly higher than several regional peers but similar to some high-performing states. Note that student-teacher ratio is not necessarily reflective of class size. Student–counselor ratios are better than the national average but still above the recommended 250:1



*Comparisons to high-performing peer states use the Urban Institute's States' Demographically Adjusted Performance on the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress s to allow more comparable cross-state performance rankings.

Student-Teacher Ratio*

16.2:1

This reflects typical classroom staffing and influences engagement, individualized instruction, and learning conditions.

***Not an indicator of class size**

Student-Counselor Ratio

332:1

The American School Counselor Ratio Recommends 250:1. Oklahoma counselors support significantly more students than the national guideline.

Research shows mixed evidence on the impact of broad ratio changes but stronger benefits for targeted class-size reductions in early grades (K–3) and high-needs settings. How schools deploy teachers and student-support staff plays a critical role in strengthening engagement, learning conditions, and student outcomes.

INSTRUCTIONAL TIME & CALENDAR MODELS

Oklahoma's calendar requirements align with national norms for instructional hours but fall below most peer states on the number of school days. Fifty-one Oklahoma districts use 4-day weeks, compressing required hours into fewer, longer days.

Oklahoma Instructional Requirements

166* MINIMUM REQUIRED INSTRUCTIONAL DAYS

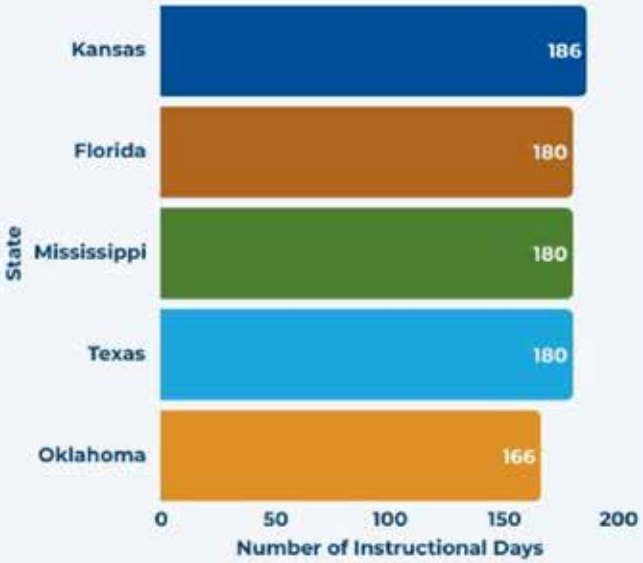
1,086 MINIMUM REQUIRED INSTRUCTIONAL HOURS

298 NUMBER OF DISTRICTS ON INSTRUCTIONAL HOURS SCHEDULE

51 NUMBER OF DISTRICTS ON 4-DAY SCHEDULES

*ALSO THE AVERAGE NUMBER OF INSTRUCTIONAL DAYS

States such as Mississippi, Florida, and Texas generally operate closer to 180 instructional days.

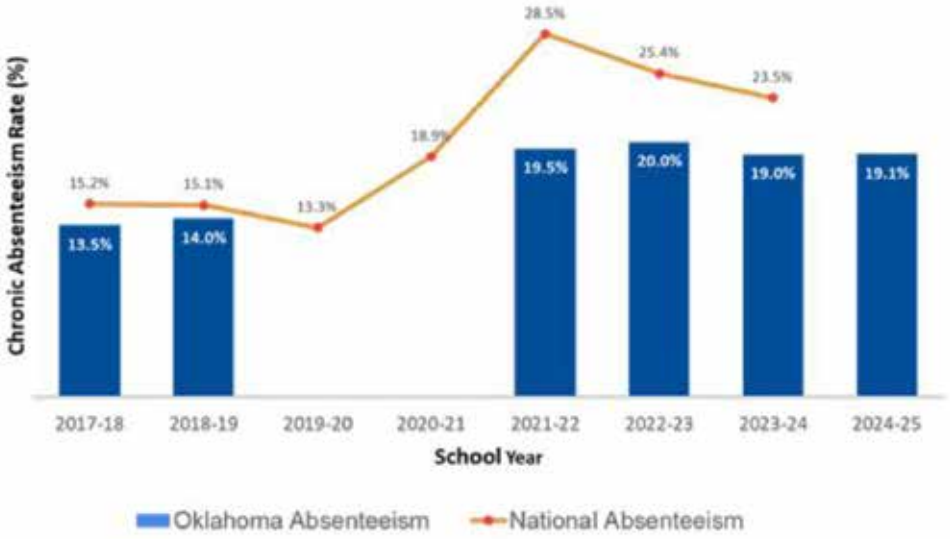


Research shows that while total instructional hours matter, how that time is organized has a greater impact on student learning. Models that compress hours into fewer, longer school days are generally less effective, especially for younger students, due to higher student fatigue and fewer high-quality instructional cycles. High-performing states typically distribute comparable annual hours across more school days, using shorter, focused instructional blocks.

CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

Chronic absenteeism (10%+ days missed) rose after the pandemic and has not fully recovered. Notably, Oklahoma remains slightly below national rates.

Oklahoma vs. National Chronic Absenteeism Rates (2018-2025)



Students who miss 10% or more of the school year fall behind academically, and entire classrooms feel the effects as teachers reteach missed content. Addressing it through attendance initiatives and optimized instructional time can strengthen recovery and statewide results.

ADVANCED PLACEMENT

AP participation has rebounded strongly from the pandemic low. Additionally, the percentage of exams earning college credit (score 3+) has climbed steadily to 61% in 2025, the highest in a decade.

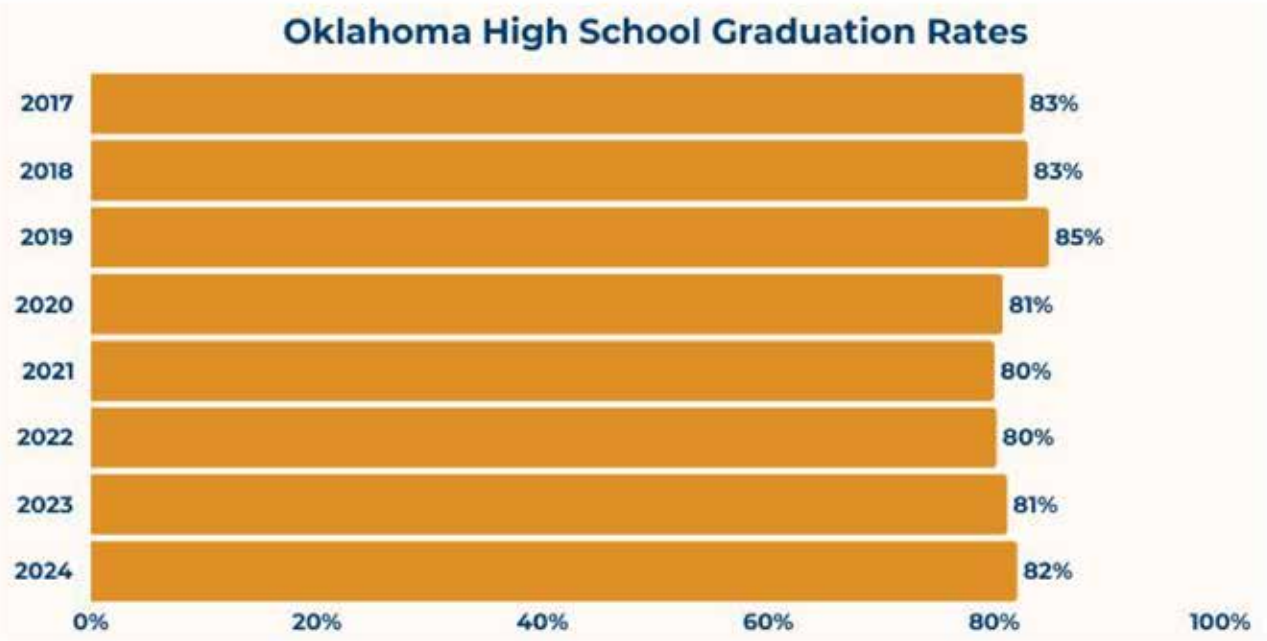
$13,375,116
potential tuition and fee savings to Oklahoma students and families as a result of AP exams taken in 2024.



Expanding access to rigorous coursework broadens students' college and career opportunities. Strong performance enables many students to earn college credit, reducing costs for families. These trends reflect statewide and local efforts to support advanced learning and readiness.

GRADUATION RATES

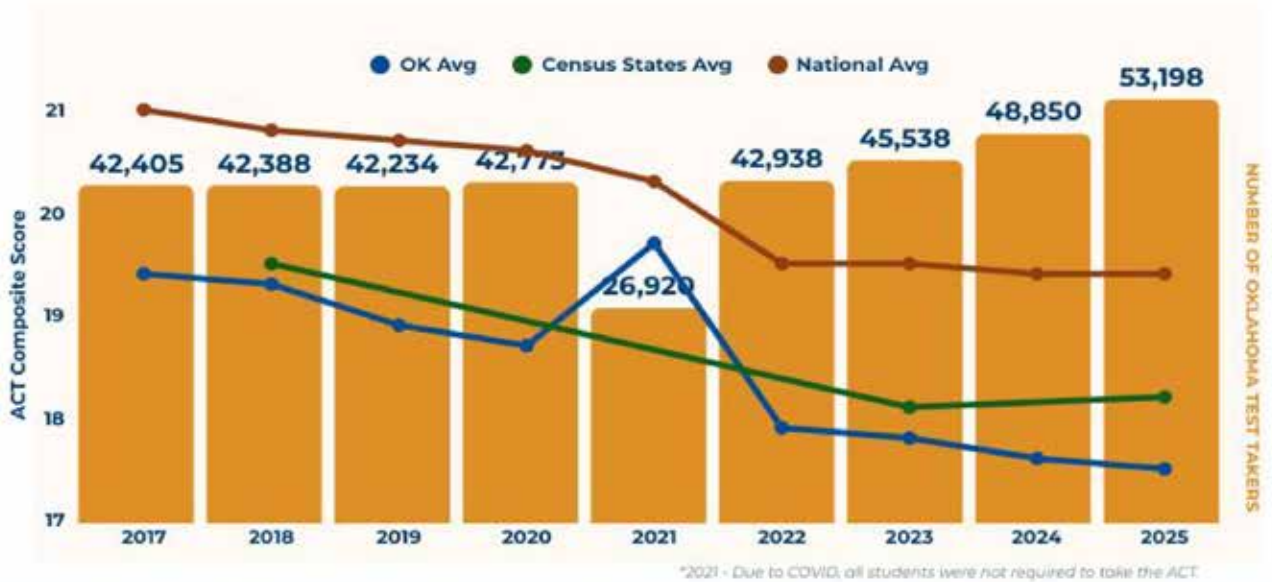
Oklahoma's graduation rates have held steady near 80% for nearly a decade.



These trends illustrate how students are navigating postsecondary pathways, including careers, training programs, service opportunities, and higher education. Clear data support efforts to strengthen advising, readiness, and access to multiple high-quality options after high school.

ACT PERFORMANCE & PARTICIPATION TRENDS

Oklahoma has provided the ACT (or SAT) at no cost to every junior since 2016, one of the few states testing 100% of students. Oklahoma is about 2 points lower than the national average of 19.4 drawn only from self-selected, college-bound test-takers. There are currently 9 census states testing all juniors.



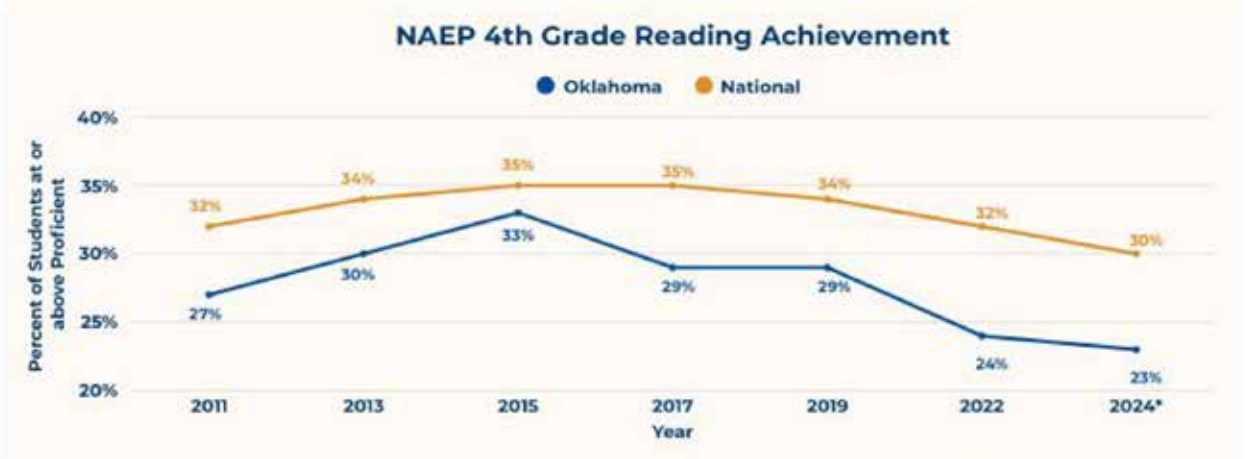
*2021 - Due to COVID, all students were not required to take the ACT.

Giving every Oklahoma student a free opportunity to take the ACT levels the playing field and eliminates financial barriers that can keep some students from even applying to college. Pairing universal testing with targeted tutoring, summer bridge programs, and strong core instruction in middle and high school can raise scores while keeping opportunity open to all.

NAEP READING (4TH GRADE)

NAEP 4th grade reading is one of the strongest indicators of a state's long-term academic trajectory. Reading by 4th grade is considered a national benchmark because students transition from "learning to read" to "reading to learn." NAEP provides a consistent, comparable measure across states and over time, allowing Oklahoma's early literacy progress to be evaluated against national trends.

Note: the NAEP is administered every two years.



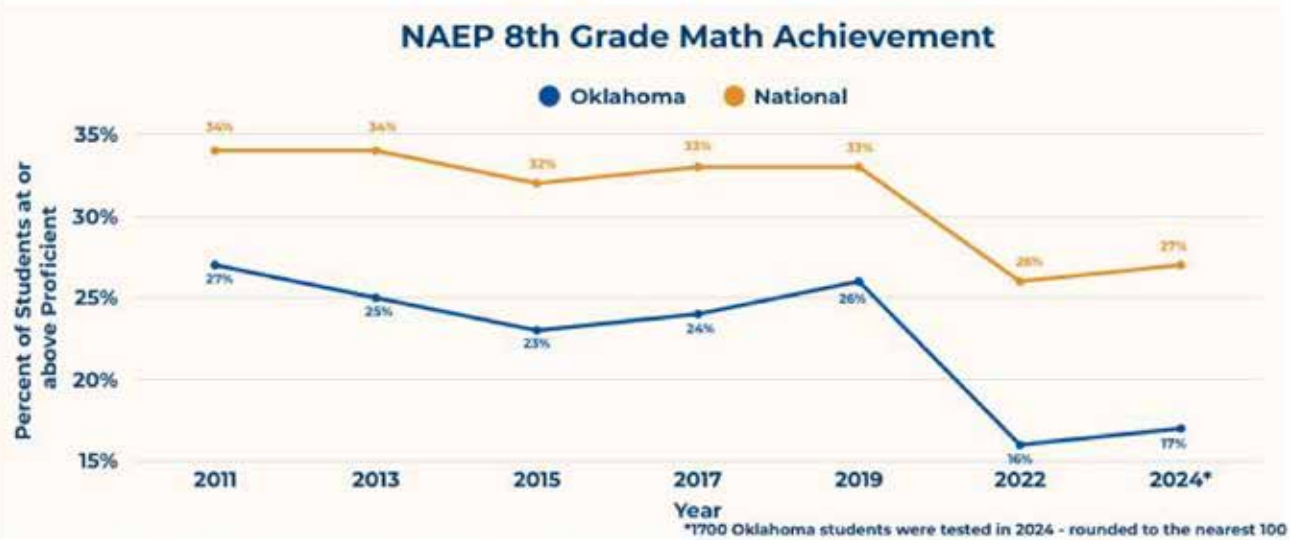
*1700 Oklahoma students were tested in 2024 - rounded to the nearest 100

Oklahoma's early reading performance has declined over time and remains below the national average, with only 23% of students scoring proficient in 2024. Strengthening early literacy will require continued investment in high-quality instructional materials, Science of Reading implementation, strong attendance, and intensive support in the early grades—areas where high-performing states have made sustained gains.

NAEP MATH (8TH GRADE)

NAEP 8th grade math is a key national benchmark of student readiness for advanced coursework and the workforce. Unlike state tests, NAEP provides a stable, comparable measure across states and over time. NAEP 8th-grade math is widely looked at by researchers and policymakers because it reflects cumulative learning from elementary and middle school.

Note: the NAEP is administered every two years.



*1700 Oklahoma students were tested in 2024 - rounded to the nearest 100

Over the past decade, Oklahoma's NAEP math performance has remained below national levels, with sharp declines following the pandemic and limited signs of recovery. Strengthening math outcomes will require investments in early-grade numeracy, improved instructional quality, and consistent attendance—areas where high-performing states have made sustained, long-term commitments. Without targeted action, Oklahoma risks falling further behind.

GLOSSARY

Alternative Certification
A pathway to becoming a teacher for those who did not complete a teacher education program. A college-credit course in classroom management and pedagogical principles is required during the provisional certification.

Average Daily Membership (ADM)
An average number of students is taken twice a year to arrive at a student population. This is calculated by dividing the sum of enrolled students' total days present and days absent by the number of days taught. The First-Quarter Statistical Report (FQSR) is completed after the first nine weeks, and the Annual Statistical Report (ASR) is completed after the school year.

Economically Disadvantaged Student
Any student eligible for federally funded free and reduced-price meal programs or who meets the criteria from the Economic Disadvantage Survey.

Emergency Certification
A teaching certificate issued on an emergency basis for one school year to someone who has not yet met the certification qualifications of a state-approved program. Districts may request emergency certification for a specific candidate only after exhausting every option to find an appropriately certified person for the open position.

Enrollment
A count of students enrolled in a school on October 1.

Financial Support of Schools
The primary allocation of state funds appropriated by the Legislature to schools. Also known as the State Aid Funding Formula, this allocation distributes money to districts based on their Weighted Average Daily Membership (WADM) and accounts for other funding the district may receive, including property taxes and other state-dedicated revenue such as gross production tax and school land earnings. The goal of the formula is to provide equity across all schools, regardless of socio-economic status or proportion of students with special needs.

Individualized Education Program (IEP)
A written document developed collaboratively by parents and school personnel that outlines the special education program for a student with a disability. This document is developed, reviewed, and revised at an IEP meeting at least annually and required by the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Regional Price Parities (RPP)
The federal government's official index for comparing price levels across states, produced by the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA). RPP is used to adjust salaries and other economic measures for cost-of-living variations, ensuring fair regional comparisons. It is the recommended method by organizations such as NCES, CEPA, and national research groups for real salary analyses. The 2023 RPP data is applied in this report for teacher compensation adjustments.

School Calendar Hours Requirement
Districts must provide at least 166 six-hour days or 1,086 hours of instruction per school year. They may suspend school days or hours as long as those hours are made up by the end of the year.

State Aid Funding
See Financial Support of Schools on the previous page.

Support of Teachers and Students
Provides line-item support for an array of initiatives separate from the State Aid Funding Formula. This allocation supports initiatives including alternative education, professional development, Advanced Placement teacher training and fee assistance, Reading Sufficiency, and Sooner Start.

Weighted Average Daily Membership (WADM)
The ADM adjusted to reflect the weights of individual students. Students are assigned a greater weight if they belong to a student group that requires additional educational services, such as students with disabilities. WADM determines funding allocations to the district.

PER-PUPIL EXPENDITURES CLASSIFICATION

Expenditures are reported by the Function dimension as follows:
Instruction, Support Services-Students, Support Services-Instructional Staff, Support Services-General Administration, Support Services-School Administration, Support Services-Central, Operation and Maintenance of Plant Services, Student Transportation Services, Child Nutrition Programs Operations, Community Services Operations, and Facilities Acquisition and Construction Services.

1. Instruction (Function 1000)
Instruction includes activities dealing directly with the interaction between teachers and students. This would include the classroom, television, telephone, correspondence, and other educational or assistive technology devices.

2. Support Services for Students (Function 2100)
Activities designed to assess and improve the well-being of students and to supplement the teaching process.

3. Support Services for Instructional Staff (Function 2200)
Activities associated with assisting the instructional staff with the content and process of providing learning experiences for students.

4. Support Services for General Administration (Function 2300)
Activities involving the establishment and administration of policy in connection with operating the entire school district.

5. Support Services for School Administration (Function 2400)
Activities concerned with overall administrative responsibility for a single school or a group of schools.

6. Support Services for Business (Function 2500)
Activities that support other administrative and instructional functions, fiscal services, human resources, planning, and administrative information technology.

7. Operation and Maintenance of Plant Services (Function 2600)
Activities concerned with keeping the physical plant open, comfortable, and safe for use, and keeping the grounds, buildings, and equipment in an effective working condition and state of repair. Activities that maintain safety in buildings, on the grounds, and in the vicinity of schools are included.

8. Student Transportation Services (Function 2700)
Activities concerned with the conveyance of students to and from school as provided by state law. Included are trips between home and school, and trips to school activities.

9. Child Nutrition Services (Function 3100)
Activities concerned with providing food to students and staff in a school or LEA. This service area includes the preparation and service of regular and incidental meals, including breakfasts, lunches, or supplements in connection with school activities, and the delivery of food.

10. Enterprise Services (Function 3200)
Activities that are financed and operated in a manner similar to private business enterprises where the stated intent is that the costs are financed or recovered primarily through user charges.

Total Expenditures using:
Funds: 11-60, 81, 82, & 86
Functions: 1000-3200
Objects: Excludes 511, 561, 564, 567, 591 & 700 Series
Programs: Excludes 500 & 600 Series
Plus credits received from: Teacher's Retirement, Career Tech, Student Assessment and Commodities.

Notes

This is a resource document for you to use.
Take notes, highlight, use as a text book.

The 'Southern Surge' suggests Oklahoma's education system can bounce back

Adam Tyner, NonDoc, February 23, 2026

Oklahomans didn't need a financial website to tell us our schools are struggling.

When WalletHub ranked Oklahoma's K-12 system 50th in the nation last year, it mostly put a number on a widespread sentiment among Oklahomans. A spring 2025 poll found that a majority of Oklahomans would give the state's schools a "D" or an "F" grade, and hardly anyone — just 5 percent of respondents — would award our schools an "A."

Yet a new research report from the Oklahoma Center for Education Policy at the University of Oklahoma, where I serve as executive director, shows these poor rankings are the result of a tragic reversal of fortunes for the Sooner State, which used to perform much better when compared with other states in the nation and in the region.

Using federal data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the report shows a sad reality, as some of Oklahoma's student outcomes are the lowest on record. In 2024, Oklahoma ranked 48th nationally on a pooled measure of core NAEP performance — math and reading proficiency in 4th and 8th grades — ahead of only West Virginia, Alaska and New Mexico.

If that were the whole story, one might shrug and say Oklahoma is a rural, lower-GDP state doing the best it can. On the contrary, the state's performance looks even worse when compared to its regional peers. Among the 12 states with universities participating in the Southeastern Conference, Oklahoma ranks last overall in combined math and reading achievement:

State	Regional Rank	National Rank
Tennessee	#1	#17
Kentucky	#2	#21
Florida	#3	#27
Mississippi	#4	#28
Georgia	#5	#30
Louisiana	#6	#34
South Carolina	#7	#35
Texas	#8	#36
Missouri	#9	#37
Arkansas	#10	#43
Alabama	#11	#44
Oklahoma	#12	#48

This table includes NAEP ranks based on 2024 data for the NAEP Core of math and reading in 4th grade and 8th grade. Ranks are for combined grades and subjects and are produced by standardizing the scaled score measures and averaging across grades and subjects. (Provided)

Oklahoma's worst-in-the-region rank is not a result of unique demographics, either. Most of Oklahoma's student groups also rank last among SEC states.

This includes Black students, Hispanic students, students of two or more races, white students and relatively affluent students:

Student Group		Oklahoma's Regional Rank	Worse than Oklahoma
Socioeconomic Status	Less Affluent	#10 out of 12	Missouri and Alabama
	More Affluent	#12 out of 12	None
Race/Ethnicity	Native American	#1 out of 1	Not Applicable
	Black	#12 out of 12	None
	Hispanic	#12 out of 12	None
	Two or more races	#12 out of 12	None
	White	#12 out of 12	None

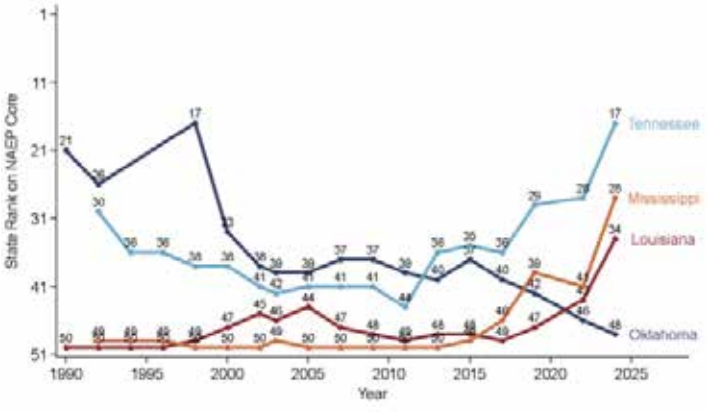
This table includes NAEP ranks based on 2024 data for the NAEP Core of math and reading in 4th grade and 8th grade. Ranks for combined grades and subjects are produced by standardizing the scaled score measures and averaging across grades and/or subjects. Highlighted rows are those in which Oklahoma's rank is worst in the region. No other state in the region produced NAEP Core scores for Native American students that year. (Provided)

Oklahoma's position at the bottom of the heap is, however, a relatively recent phenomenon.

In fact, in every year of these data until 2013, Oklahoma's education system ranked higher than those of Louisiana, Mississippi and even today's regional leader, Tennessee. At the time, these states were often viewed as chronic underperformers, especially Mississippi, which ranked near the bottom nationally for nearly two decades.

In recent years, however, those states have reversed their fortunes, as a "Southern Surge" has lifted these states and several others in the region. Tennessee was the first of these states to pull ahead of Oklahoma, overtaking it in 2013. Mississippi followed in 2019, then Louisiana passed Oklahoma in 2022.

The contrast is especially stark in Mississippi's case. After ranking 50th or near-50th in nearly every NAEP administration from the early 1990s through 2013, Mississippi rose sharply in the late 2010s and early 2020s, and the state's



This figure shows NAEP Core ranks for 4th grade and 8th grade math and reading data, including 50 states and the District of Columbia. Ranks are for combined grades and subjects and are produced by standardizing the scaled score measures and averaging across grades and/or subjects. Ranks in years 1990 to 2002 are three-period moving averages with rank adjustment to account for the fact that not all states participated in these years. (Provided)

2024 results placed it 28th nationally:

Tennessee's trajectory is similarly instructive, with a ranking that was slightly lower than Oklahoma's from the 1990s until the 2010s.

After 2011, the state's ranking began to improve steadily, and the Volunteer State now lands in the top third nationally and leads the region. Louisiana's gains have been more gradual but nonetheless meaningful, particularly in recent years. In contrast, Oklahoma's relative position deteriorated during the same period, leaving the state behind these regional peers that it once outperformed.

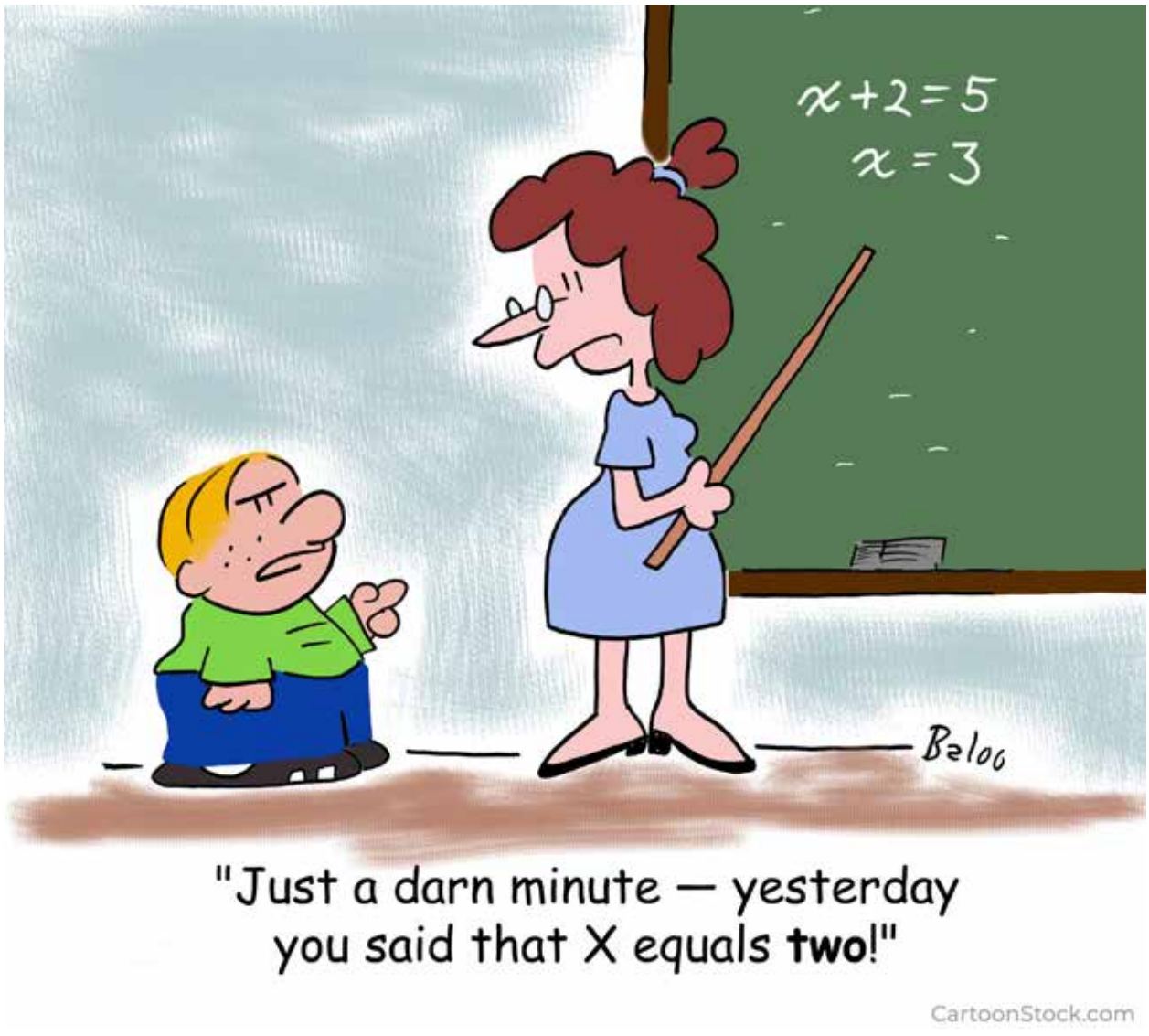
More research is needed to isolate the causal mechanisms behind the Southern Surge, but these ranking improvements appear to reflect deliberate efforts to improve instruction and accountability within those states. Reforms included investments in teacher support and high-quality professional development, renewed emphasis on evidence-based reading instruction, stronger retention requirements for students needing remediation, and changes to curriculum and standards. Experts in those states often emphasize that their efforts were not one-time initiatives but part of multi-year strategies focused on systemic improvement.

Overall, suggestions that Oklahoma's schools rank poorly are well supported by the nation's most credible academic data. At the same time, history shows that Oklahoma once performed far better than it does today. There is nothing inherent in the state's geography, economy or demographics that requires it to rank near the bottom. Other states with similar challenges have reversed course.

Oklahoma has mounted comebacks before. The data suggest there is no reason we cannot do so again.

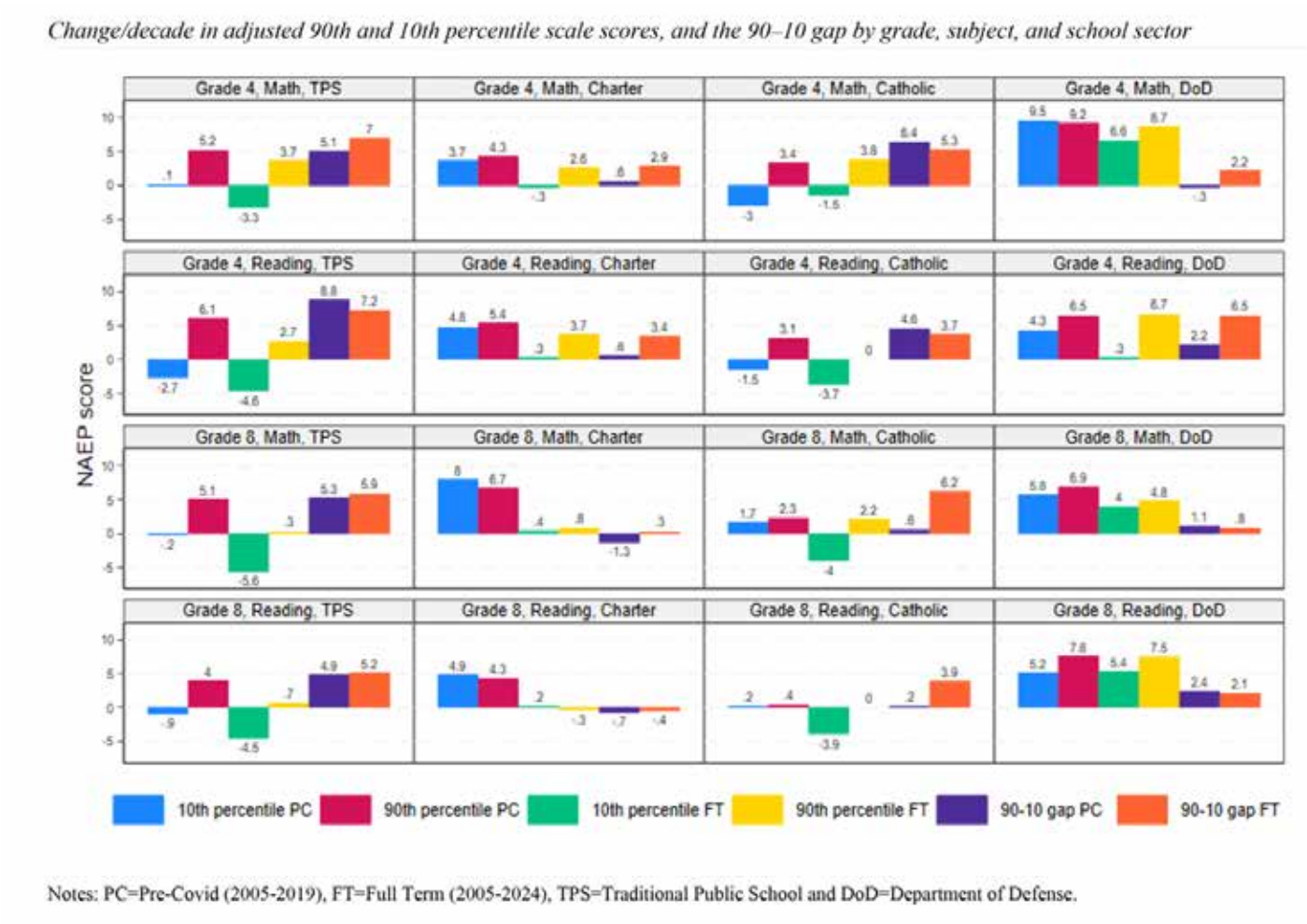
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(Editor's note: This article is adapted from The Fall to 48th: Documenting Oklahoma's Educational Decline, a recent publication of the Oklahoma Center for Education Policy at the University of Oklahoma. Adam Tyner is OCEP's executive director and the author of the report.)



The 90/10 Gap: Research Shows Struggling Students Falling Behind Since 2005

Kevin Mahnken, The 74, March 16, 2026



The Nation's Achievement Inequality Report Card: An Assessment of Test Score and Equality Trends in Traditional Public, Charter, Catholic, and Department of Defense Schools (Annenberg Institute/Brown University)

In the vast majority of schools around the United States, the academic gap between the highest- and lowest-achieving students has grown significantly since 2005, according to a recently released paper. The divergence was largely driven by stagnation among struggling students, which turned into steep learning losses during the COVID pandemic, the authors conclude.

The paper, circulated through Brown University's Annenberg Institute in January, examines the learning of American students attending traditional public schools, charters, Catholic academies, and schools operated by the Department of Defense. While disparities between high-flyers and their lower-performing counterparts have widened across the board, they grew the fastest in public and Catholic schools.

Education leaders have warned of the trend toward increasing educational inequality for much of the last decade. During that time, each release of data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress — a federally administered exam commonly referred to as the Nation's Report Card — showed lower-scoring test takers falling further behind; typically, top-scoring participants were also pulling away from the pack. By the end of the COVID era, differences in outcomes that were large at the outset had ballooned even wider.

Patrick Wolf, an economist at the University of Arkansas and one of the paper's co-authors, called his findings "demoralizing," arguing that many American schools are clearly failing the students who most need their help.

"We expect and hope our public schools will be great equalizers and will reduce gaps between the top performers and the low performers, or the rich and the poor," he said. "But over the last 20 years, we don't see that in the data, and the gap has grown by a lot."

‘We were not being heard’

Wolf and his collaborators set out to measure what he referred to as the “90/10 gap” — the difference in NAEP scores between students who score at the 90th percentile (i.e., those scoring higher than 89 percent of their counterparts across the country) and those at the 10th percentile (those outscored by 90 percent of other test takers). To do so, they measured performance data from 2005, the first year that charter schools participated in the test, through 2024.

In all, the research team gathered scores from six million test takers through 10 iterations of the exam, controlling for factors like students’ race or socioeconomic status, as well as the educational background of their parents. Each NAEP administration generates data for both fourth and eighth graders in the core subjects of math and English.

Their estimates show that the academic gaps grew fastest in public schools. In each of the two decades between 2005 and 2024, scores for fourth graders at the 90th percentile increased by about four points in math and three points in reading; 10th-percentile scores dropped by roughly three and five points, respectively, resulting in a net disparity that was seven points larger in both subjects.

While those calculations are somewhat technical, the bottom line is much starker: The already-substantial gap between the most advanced and most challenged fourth graders expanded by 1.3 years’ worth of learning gains between the Bush administration and the Biden administration. For eighth graders, the gap grew by one-half year of learning in both subjects over the same time period.

Similar divergences, though of somewhat smaller magnitude, were found in Catholic schools, which enroll approximately 3.5 percent of American K–12 students. During the period under study, the 90/10 gap grew by roughly 5 points per decade in fourth-grade math, six points in eighth-grade math, and four points in reading for both fourth and eighth graders.

Strikingly, the 90/10 gap for both sectors swelled even in the years preceding the pandemic. Those gaps, leading up to 2019, reflected both steady growth from children at the top of the heap, along with a lack of progress — and, in some cases, pre-COVID learning loss — from those at the bottom.

Peggy Carr is a former commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics, the research entity responsible for administering NAEP and reporting its results. Until February, when she was fired by the Trump administration along with most of the NCES staff, she regularly communicated with both politicians and the public about the meaning of the exam — including by highlighting the growth of the 90/10 gap and the persistently disappointing performance of children scoring at the 10th percentile.

In an interview with The 74, she said the discourse around NAEP was too focused on scores at the average, which tend to conceal wider swings among students far above or below that point.

“We were not being heard as clearly as we wanted to be,” Carr said. “We were trying to make it very clear that you need to look at the entire distribution for years, but it wasn’t the focus of policy makers.”

DoD schools, charters

Notably, both charters and DoD-administered schools saw a much slower drift between high- and low-achieving students, much of which appears to have been triggered directly by the pandemic.

In charter schools, the 90/10 gap grew by less than one point between 2005 and 2019 for fourth graders; for eighth graders, the gap actually shrunk during that period because students at the 10th percentile improved in performance faster than those at the 90th. The same narrowing was seen in fourth-grade math scores at DoD schools, where students across the spectrum made huge gains before the onset of COVID.

Tom Loveless, a veteran observer of K–12 schools and former director of the Brookings Institution’s Brown Center on Education Policy, called those results impressive, but noted that the lessons that can be drawn from the charter and DoD sectors were limited. Collectively, they account for only about 8 percent of America’s K–12 students, and parents enrolling their children in them can differ dramatically from the public at large.

“If you work for the Defense Department, your employer is running the school,” he observed. “Your superior officer can call you up and say, ‘Your kid is acting up,’ and something’s going to be done about it quickly.”

Perhaps the most dispiriting part of the trend is that America’s 90/10 gap exploded so visibly at the same time that achievement gaps — whether along racial, socioeconomic, or other lines — transfixed the education world. Educators, office holders, policy wonks, and activists all put academic disparities at the heart of their work during the years between the late-1990s and the mid-2010s.

For a large portion of the “education reform” era kicked off by the 2002 passage of the No Child Left Behind law, underperforming students did see significant progress, Wolf said. But the years since 2013 have been marked by a pronounced reversal of those gains.

“By definition, there will always be a gap between the students performing at the 90th percentile and students performing at the 10th percentile,” he acknowledged. “But we don’t want it to be wide, and we don’t want it to be getting wider.”

2024 Census data: Oklahoma ranks as 8th poorest state

Dave Hamby, Oklahoma Policy Institute, September 12, 2025

Data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2024 American Community Survey, released Sept. 11, show that Oklahoma's poverty rate was 14.9 percent, which means that more than 1 in 7 state residents live in poverty. While the state's overall poverty rate improved by a percentage point from last year, Oklahoma ranked as having the nation's eighth highest poverty rate.

The national poverty rate in 2024 was 12.1 percent. The states with higher rates of poverty than Oklahoma in 2024 were: Louisiana (18.7 percent), Mississippi (17.8 percent), West Virginia (16.7 percent), New Mexico (16.4 percent), Kentucky (15.6 percent), Arkansas (15.5 percent), and Alabama (15.2 percent).

While Oklahoma and other states saw small decreases in its poverty rate during 2024, persistent poverty and growing income inequality remain significant factors for many Oklahomans and their families. Looking forward, it's also important to consider how the "One Big Beautiful Bill" is projected to make lives worse by drastically cutting the programs and services that help many Oklahomans, families, and children.

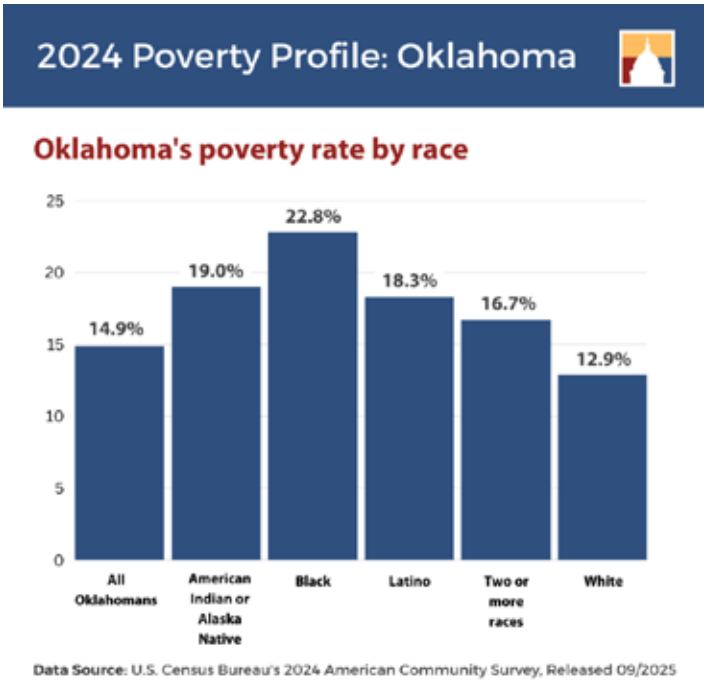
Oklahoma children continue to live in poverty at higher rates



The latest Census data show that child poverty rates are higher than for Oklahomans overall with about 1 in 5 Oklahoma children (18.9 percent) living at or below the federal poverty level. For a family of three, this means the child lived in a household that earned $25,249 or less in 2024.

While the state's child poverty rate decreased from 20.8 percent to 18.9 percent in 2024, Oklahoma had the ninth highest child poverty rate among the nation's 50 states. Oklahoma children experience poverty at rates well above the national child poverty rate, which was 15.5 percent.

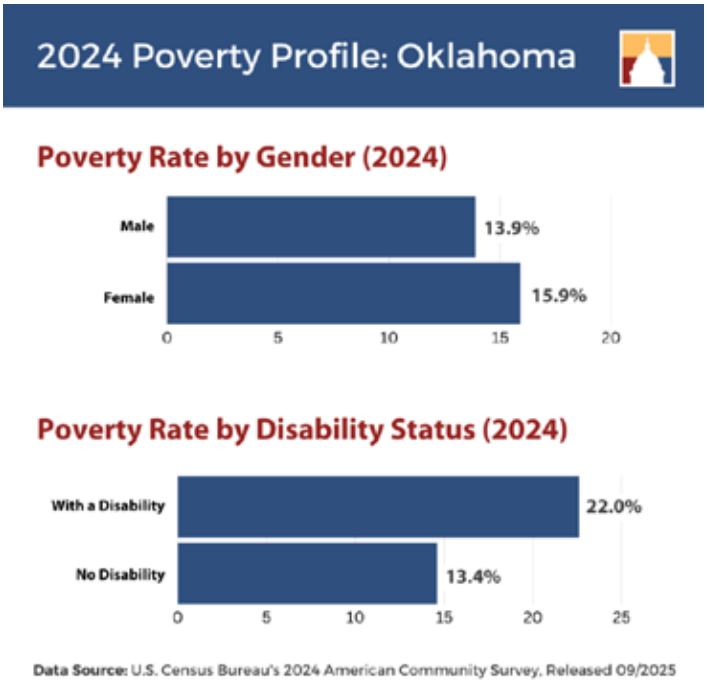
Not all Oklahomans are struggling equally



While poverty hits residents across the state, not all Oklahomans bear the brunt of poverty equally. Black, Latino, and American Indian/Alaska Natives in Oklahoma saw decreases in poverty rates, but the numbers show they continue to experience poverty at disproportionately higher rates when compared to white families.

Black Oklahomans experienced a poverty rate of more than 1 in 5 (22.8 percent, down from 28.1 percent), and Latino Oklahomans reported a poverty rate of 18.3 percent, a decrease from 21.5 percent in 2023. The poverty rate for American Indians/Alaska Natives in Oklahoma decreased to 19 percent compared to 19.8 percent in 2023. More than 1 in 6 (16.7 percent) of Oklahomans of two or more races lived in poverty.

In comparison, the rate of white Oklahomans living in poverty was 12.9 percent, down from 13.4 percent in 2023. When looking at poverty rates along racial demographics,

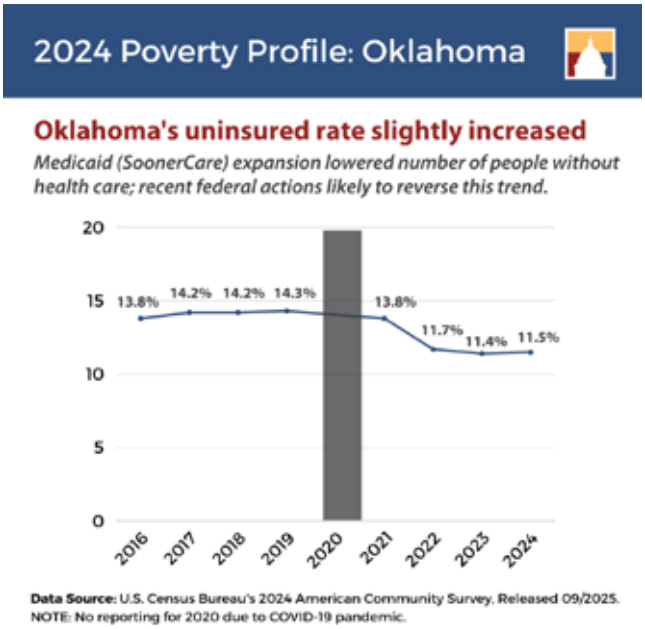


it's clear that communities of color have a higher concentration of poverty. This becomes especially clear when the communities with the highest rates of poverty only make up between 6 and 13 percent of the state's population.

Poverty is not only racialized but also gendered. Census data show that women are substantially more likely to live in poverty than men. The poverty rate for women was 15.9 percent while it was 13.9 percent for men.

Disabled Oklahomans are also impoverished at higher rates — the same disabilities that may limit their ability to work are rarely severe enough to qualify for government assistance. In 2024, more than 1 in 5 disabled Oklahomans (22 percent) were experiencing poverty.

The number of uninsured Oklahomans increased slightly



The rates of Oklahomans without health insurance increased slightly to 11.5 percent, up from 11.4 percent in 2023. Oklahoma's uninsured rate continues to be well above the national average of 8.2 percent.

In recent years, Oklahoma has made significant progress in increasing the number of people with health insurance thanks to expansion of Medicaid, which operates as SoonerCare in Oklahoma. However, this progress could easily be wiped out from recent federal budget cuts and more restrictive Medicaid requirements.

What can be done to reduce poverty in Oklahoma?

While the latest Census data highlight the significant financial needs for Oklahomans, state lawmakers have a number of policy solutions available to reverse the state's poverty trajectory. The governor's decision to push a statewide vote on a minimum wage increase (State Question 832) until 2026 essentially freezes any efforts to increase income for the lowest-wage workers. However, lawmakers can still deliver relief to low- and moderate-income Oklahomans with targeted tax credits; make the tax system generally fairer; move to protect tenants and increase access to affordable housing; and invest in child care, paid family leave, public education, and other necessities for working families.

The Census data make it clear that Oklahomans are facing disproportionally high poverty levels, but the state has been slow to pass legislation that can provide relief to everyday Oklahomans. In response to the stark differences in poverty between Oklahomans of different races and walks of life, the state could expand access to tax credits, avoid tax cuts that will make our tax code more regressive and disproportionality benefit the wealthiest Oklahomans, and pass significant reform around court fines and fees. Oklahoma can also pass common sense economic policies like raising the minimum wage, increasing access to child care, and passing a paid family medical leave program.

Oklahoma improves, but still ranked in worst states for child well-being, report shows

Ana Barboza, The Oklahoman, June 8, 2026

Though Oklahoma moved two spots up on overall child well-being, a report released Monday, June 8, shows the state continues to rank among the bottom 10 states in the nation.

The 2026 KIDS Count Data Book by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a Baltimore-based private philanthropic group, shows Oklahoma tied with Texas as 44th among 50 states, an improvement from last year's ranking at 46th place. The report also shows the states' ranking on other categories, including education, health and economic child well-being.

"I hate that it does not shock me," said Margaret Creighton, president and CEO of Positive Tomorrows, an Oklahoma City school and social service agency that serves children and families experiencing homelessness. "I do think that there's a long way that we can go."

Oklahoma ranked 48th in education, only followed by Alaska and New Mexico, and showed worsened results on several education-related categories, including fourth graders not proficient in reading, going from 71% in 2019 to 77% in 2024.

"I really want to stress the importance of children building that foundation for literacy by developing language through reading, talking and playing, and the early stage is so critical because of the Oklahoma data, and it's showing that there is a high need for strong literacy support," said Elizabeth Clifford, Education Services Director at Early Birds, a free Oklahoma program that promotes early literacy and reading through school readiness courses and educational tools to parents of children under age 5.

Gov. Kevin Stitt recently signed Senate Bill 1778 into law, which amends the state's Strong Readers Act by requiring third graders to score a basic or above grade on the statewide reading test, earn an acceptable score on an alternative test, or qualify for a good-cause exemption to move on to fourth grade. The changes will go into effect for the 2027-28 academic year.

State Superintendent Lindel Fields, who was appointed to the position following Ryan Walters' resignation in September, wrote in a statement to The Oklahoman that the state's focus on literacy, career pathways and teacher recruitment and retention is a step in the right direction, but there is still a long way to go.

"Our work over these past nine months has been to lay a solid foundation," Fields said. "It's my hope the next state superintendent can build an educational system that will lead the nation in innovation and excellence."

What other rankings were shown on the report?

Oklahoma ranked 37th on health, showing stable percentages in low birth-weight babies and children without health insurance.

"Addressing our state's health challenges requires coordinated, multifaceted strategies rather than a single solution, ..." a spokesperson for the Oklahoma State Department of Health wrote in a statement to The Oklahoman. "Lasting improvement will come from supporting healthier choices in everyday life, in homes, communities, and workplaces."

Though Oklahoma ranked 43rd in family and community, the report showed slight improvements on some of its categories, including children living in high-poverty areas, teen births per 1,000 and children in single-parent families.

Carly Putnam, Oklahoma Policy Institute policy director and Kids Count coordinator, believes that Oklahoma leaders' "rhetoric" about making the state stronger and more prosperous does not match ranking results.

"On one hand, policy choices got us here, but on the other hand, policy choices can help us improve," Putnam told The Oklahoman.

Oklahoma ranked among the top half of all states in only three of 16 categories:

- 15th on teens not attending school and not working
- 23rd on children in households that spend more than 30% of their income on housing
- 23rd on percentage of low-birthweight babies

Oklahoma has continuously ranked at the bottom 10 on overall child well-being since 2019. The last time the state was above that number was on 2017, with a ranking of 36th.

Putnam emphasized the need for investment and said while the state is improving in many aspects, it could also find ways to improve in others.

"Even if we did everything right immediately, it would take time to see that come out in the data," Putnam said. "They say the best time is today, and I think, when it comes to addressing needs, we need to recognize that systemic change takes time and that we need to be thinking long term in investing in Oklahoma children and families."

The Oklahoma State Department of Education is focusing on implementing changes that follow the 2026 legislative session, Fields wrote to The Oklahoman, including the expansion of the Helping to Elevate Reading Outcomes for Every Student, or HEROES program.

"There is no quick fix for our current predicament, but we've started by working on the fundamentals," Fields wrote. "Repaired relationships with the legislature resulted in a $230 million increase in the education budget to fund literacy and math programs, teacher raises and school security."

At Positive Tomorrows, Creighton believes that finding a job and maintaining a living wage are critical for families experiencing homelessness, but for some families, the math can get more complicated.

Oklahomans will be considering approving State Question 832 on the June 16 state elections, which proposes raising the minimum wage from $7.25 to $15 an hour by 2029.

"If you are a single adult working at $7.25 an hour, (which is) the minimum wage, and you're looking to rent a two-bedroom apartment, you would have to work over 130 hours a week just to be able to not spend more than a third of your income on rent," Creighton said.

Business groups have opposed the proposal, saying it could force some employers to close or lay off workers.

Positive Tomorrows offers a tuition-free, private school that serves kids ages 6 weeks through sixth grade and services to help families gain or maintain housing, income and employment. One of the organization's greatest challenges is not having enough space to serve families in need.

"That's always the hardest thing," Creighton said. "Telling someone no who is in crisis or needs help. That's the hardest thing that I will ever do, is have to tell someone that we don't have enough room for them."

Kelly Berger, director of family support at Positive Tomorrows, said the state should invest more in schools and their teachers to foster a society where families and schools work together.

"Improving health and education, just supporting families in general, should be a bipartisan issue," Berger said, "and I would really like to see the urgency from our legislators to look at these numbers and look at where we are in education and say that this is not acceptable.

"We have to solve these issues as Oklahomans so we can be proud of these types of reports that come out and say we are improving, not getting worse."

Oklahoma's 2026 KIDS Count rankings

ECONOMIC WELL- BEING (Oklahoma rank 30)

- Children in poverty (179,000 total. 20% in 2019 and 19% in 2024)
- Children living in households with a high housing cost burden (245,000 total. 25% in 2019 and 26% in 2024)

EDUCATION (Oklahoma rank 48)

- Fourth graders not proficient in reading (total not available. 71% in 2019 and 77% in 2024)
- Young children (ages 3 and 4) not in school (61,000 total. 57% in 2015-19 and 60% in 2020-24)

HEALTH (Oklahoma rank 37)

- Children without insurance (87,000 total. 8.2% in both 2019 and 2024)
- Child and teen deaths per 100,000 (364 total. 33 in 2019 and 35 in 2024)

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY (Oklahoma rank 43)

- Children living in high-poverty areas (89,000 total. 10% in 2015-19 and 9% in 2020-24)
- Teen births per 1,000 (2,746 total. 27 in 2019; 20 in 2024)

7th Edition: The Adequacy and Fairness of State School Finance Systems

School Finance Indicators Database, March 2025

Executive Summary

In the United States, K-12 school finance is largely controlled by the states. Every year, hundreds of billions of dollars in public funds are distributed based on 51 different configurations of formulas, rules, and regulations to over 13,000 districts that vary in terms of the students they serve, their ability to raise revenue locally, and many other characteristics.

In this seventh edition of our annual report, we evaluate the K-12 school finance systems of all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The latest year of data we present is the 2021-22 school year.

Good school finance systems compensate for factors states cannot control (e.g., student poverty, labor costs) using levers that they can control (e.g., driving funding to districts that need it most). We have devised a framework that evaluates states based largely on how well they accomplish this balance. We assess each state's funding while accounting directly for the students and communities served by its public schools.

This is important because how much a given district or state spends on its schools, by itself, is a rather blunt measure of how well those schools are funded. For example, high-poverty districts require more resources to achieve a given outcome goal—e.g., a particular average score on a standardized test—than do more affluent districts. In other words, education costs vary depending on student populations, labor markets, and other factors. That is a fundamental principle of school finance. Simply comparing how much states or districts spend ignores this enormous variation in how much they must spend to meet their students' needs.

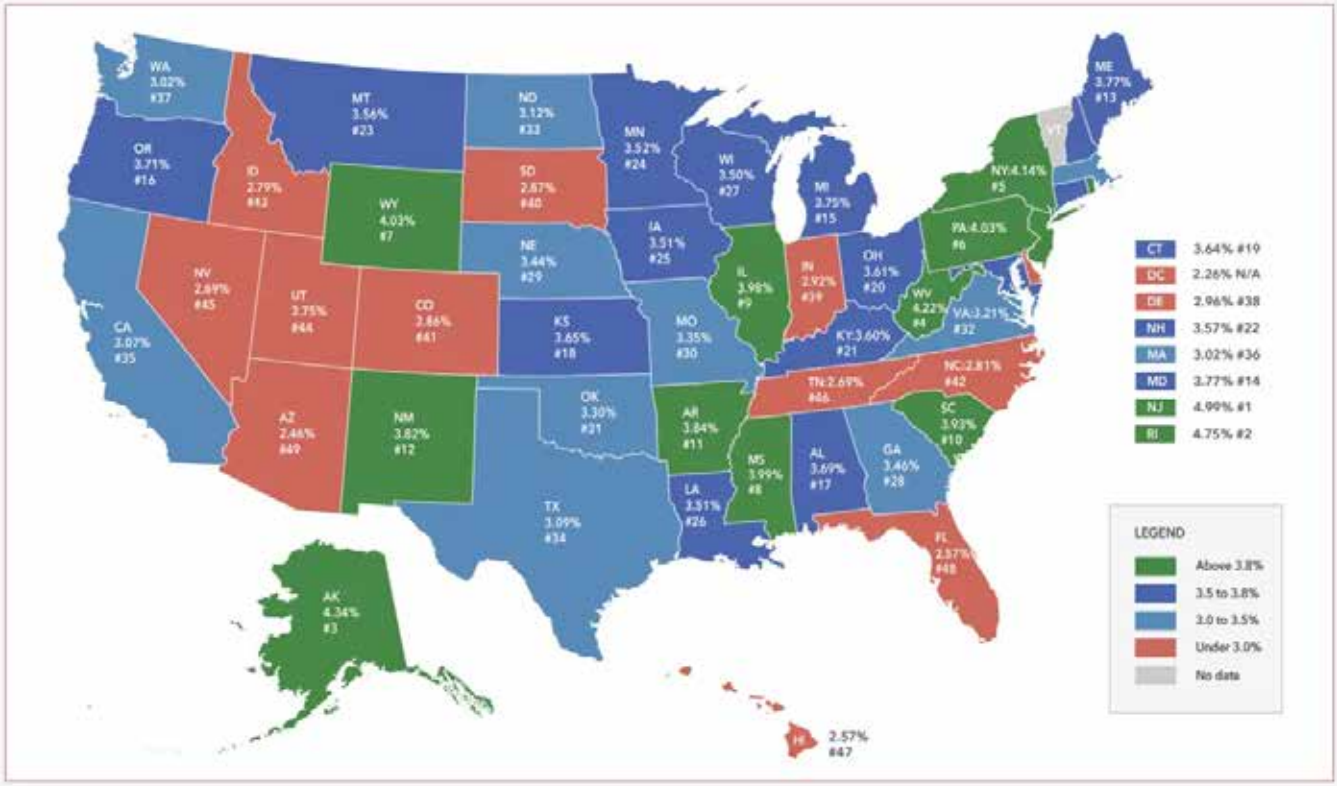
The key question, then, is not just how much states and districts spend but whether it's enough—is funding adequate for students from all backgrounds to achieve common outcome goals?

Accordingly, we use a national cost model to calculate adequate funding levels for the vast majority of the na-

FIGURE 1

State fiscal effort

Total state and local expenditures (direct to K-12 education) as a percentage of gross state product, 2022



Note: Effort in the District of Columbia should not be compared with that in other states. Effort is not available in Vermont. Ranks may reflect differences concealed by rounding.

DATA SOURCE: SCHOOL FINANCE INDICATORS DATABASE

tion's public school districts. We then use these estimates to evaluate each state—relative to other states or groups of states—based on the overall adequacy of funding across all its districts (statewide adequacy) as well as the degree to which its high-poverty districts are more or less adequately funded than its affluent districts (equal opportunity). Finally, because states vary in their ability to raise revenue (e.g., some states have larger economies than others), we also assess whether states are leveraging their capacity to fund schools by measuring total state and local spending as a percentage of states' economies (fiscal effort).

These three "core indicators"—effort, statewide adequacy, and equal opportunity—offer a parsimonious overview of whether states' systems are accomplishing their primary goal of providing adequate and equitable funding for all students. In this report, as well as the one-page state profiles that accompany the report, we present results on these three measures for each state.

Selected national findings

There are 41 states that devote a smaller share of their economies to their K-12 schools than they did before the 2007-09 recession.

Had these states returned to their pre-recession effort levels by 2016, their funding would have been $480 billion higher between 2016 and 2022, which is roughly 10 percent of all state and local school funding during those seven years.

About 70 percent of the nation's students that we identify as being in "chronically underfunded" districts—the 20 percent of districts with the most inadequate funding in the nation—are in just 12 states.

These states (Alabama, Arkansas, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Nevada, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Texas) serve only 34 percent of the nation's students.

African American students are twice as likely as white students to be in districts with funding below estimated adequate levels, and 3.5 times more likely to be in "chronically underfunded" districts.

The discrepancies between Hispanic and white students, as well as those between Native American and white students, are moderately smaller but still large.

Educational opportunity is unequal in every state. The size of the gaps varies, but in every single state, higher-poverty districts are funded less adequately than lower-poverty districts.

Policy recommendations

Based on the results of this report, we conclude with a set of basic, research-backed principles that should guide the design and improvement of all states' systems.

These policy recommendations include:

1. Better targeting of funding

If district funding levels are not determined rigorously by states, resources may appear adequate and equitable when they are not (and policymakers may not even realize it). All states should routinely "audit" their systems by commissioning studies to ensure that they are accounting for differences in the needs of the students served by each of their school districts.

2. Increase funding to meet student needs where such funding is inadequate.

The point here is for states to ensure that funding is commensurate with costs/need. In some states, adequate and equitable funding might require only a relatively modest increase in total funding (particularly state aid) along with better targeting. In other states, particularly those in which funding is inadequate and effort is low, larger increases are needed, and may include both local and state revenue.

3. Enhance federal monitoring of school funding adequacy, equity, and efficiency.

We propose that the U.S. Department of Education establish a national effort to analyze the adequacy and equity of states' systems and provide guidance to states as to how they might improve the performance of those systems.

Our findings as a whole highlight the enormous heterogeneity of school funding, both within and between states. Such diversity is no accident. So long as school finance is primarily in the hands of states, the structure and performance of systems is likely to vary substantially between those states.

The upside of this heterogeneity is that it has allowed researchers to study how different systems produce different outcomes and, as a result, we generally know what a good system looks like. Our framework for evaluating states is based on these principles. It is our hope that the data presented in this report and accompanying resources will inform school finance debates in the U.S. and help to guide legislators toward improving their states' systems.

Read the full 28-page report at https://www.schoolfinancedata.org/sites/default/files/data/sfid2025_annualreport.pdf .

A Look at American Education Issues Today (and What We Can Do)

Elevate K-12, July 15, 2025

American education issues have reached a tipping point. Across the country, students are struggling, and the cracks in our public education system are widening.

Reading and math scores are at their lowest levels in decades. Chronic absenteeism is rising. Teacher shortages have reached crisis levels, leaving over 400,000 classrooms without a certified educator or filled by someone underqualified.

At the same time, federal support is faltering. In mid-2025, the U.S. Department of Education began mass layoffs and funding freezes, slashing billions from school budgets, and eliminating vital guidance for special education, ELL programs, and compliance oversight.

How did we get here, and what can districts do next?

Many of today's biggest challenges have deep roots. But we're now in a moment where traditional fixes are no longer enough. To protect student success, district leaders must be bold: rethinking old assumptions, investing in scalable models, and finding innovative ways to ensure that every student has access to qualified, engaging teachers.

This blog explores what's broken, what's changing, and what districts can do today to adapt, evolve, and lead.

The State of American Education Issues in 2025

Many people point to the pandemic as the moment when American education began to unravel. But the truth is, COVID-19 didn't start the crisis. It simply exposed how fragile the system already was.

In 2025, that fragility has become impossible to ignore.

Student performance remains deeply impacted. National reading and math scores have yet to recover to pre-pandemic levels. Only 28% of 8th graders scored proficient in math on the latest NAEP assessment. The effects are most severe in low-income districts, where school closures, chronic absenteeism, and staffing instability have compounded over time.

A key driver of these outcomes is the worsening teacher shortage.

Today, over 400,000 classrooms are either vacant or filled by educators who do not meet state certification requirements. Schools facing the most acute shortages often rely on full-time substitutes or underqualified hires to cover core instruction.

This has become especially urgent in specialized areas. The special education teacher shortage continues to leave students with IEPs without the legally required support they need to succeed. In many districts, high student-to-teacher ratios make it even more difficult to provide targeted attention or differentiated instruction.

Many of the most pressing American education issues in education were present long before the pandemic. American schools have high student-to-teacher ratios driven by a massive K-12 teacher shortage. Faced with disciplinary problems and low school funding, schools have focused on staffing classrooms at all costs. That means larger class sizes — and teaching quality problems.

When students are taught by full-time substitutes or uncertified staff, learning gaps widen. Graduation rates, reading levels, and subject proficiency all decline. These challenges fall hardest on under-resourced communities, where limited staffing and uneven access to quality instruction are accelerating long-standing opportunity gaps.

This is no longer a temporary setback. It is a structural failure that demands systemic solutions.

How Can We Empower Schools in the Face of Today's American Education Issues?

Across the country, states and school districts are experimenting with ways to solve the teacher shortage. But it's becoming clear that this crisis won't be fixed by simply trying to hire more staff.

Empowering schools in 2025 requires a broader approach. That means innovating at the systems level, expanding access to certified teachers through flexible models, and using technology intentionally to support—not strain—existing teams.

It also means moving away from short-term stopgaps and toward long-term, sustainable solutions that protect instructional quality no matter what challenges arise.

Understand the Challenges Schools Face

Real education reform begins with acknowledging the full scope of challenges districts are facing today.

School boards are navigating a complex environment shaped by shrinking budgets, low teacher salaries, and ongoing vacancies. But in 2025, those operational pressures are compounded by something even more destabilizing: policy uncertainty.

With mass layoffs at the U.S. Department of Education and billions in funding still frozen, many districts are left without clear federal guidance on compliance, certification,

or program oversight. Oversight for special education and multilingual learner services is shifting to other agencies, and key grant programs have been delayed, restructured, or eliminated altogether.

This instability is forcing local leaders to make high-stakes decisions without a safety net. Curriculum rules vary from state to state. Certification pathways are being rewritten. And what counts as compliance in one region may no longer hold in another.

Meanwhile, students are still struggling to catch up after years of disruption. Many face rising poverty, mental health concerns, and chronic absenteeism, often without consistent support systems in place.

In this landscape, schools need more than funding. They need clarity, flexibility, and practical, scalable tools that protect instructional quality without increasing the burden on staff.

Integrate Technology into Classrooms

Technology, when implemented thoughtfully, can help improve the student experience without requiring additional full-time staff.

Administrative tools can streamline tasks like grading, scheduling, and feedback. Instructional platforms can expand course offerings and help students stay engaged. Live, virtual teaching models can bring certified educators into classrooms that would otherwise remain unstaffed.

But technology alone is not a solution. It requires the right training, support, and fit. If a tool doesn't save teachers time or enhance instruction, it can quickly become a burden. The best technology is the kind that supports instructional consistency and empowers teachers without replacing them.

Reform Policies Aimed at School Support

Many education policies focus on accountability without addressing the American education issues that hinder progress. In 2025, that disconnect is growing.

Federal funding freezes and department-level restructuring have left many districts without reliable guidance on compliance, certification, or program oversight. This has shifted the burden of navigating policy changes to district leaders, especially in critical areas like special education and multilingual learning.

To truly empower schools, policy changes must prioritize teacher access, student support, and scalable instructional models that align with local goals. Top-down mandates will not work without ground-level resources.

Districts need flexibility, not friction. And teachers need real support, not just more responsibility.

Embrace Innovative Ideas or Solutions

For too long, schools have tried to solve complex problems with the same limited tools. But in today's climate, bold thinking is no longer optional. It is essential.

Districts are finding success with new approaches that rethink how instruction is delivered. This includes livestreaming certified teachers into classrooms, using remote models to expand course access, and offering flexible supplemental learning that adapts to student needs.

These solutions do more than fill gaps. They allow districts to scale quality teaching, differentiate instruction, and reach more students regardless of geography, staffing, or policy uncertainty.

Innovation in education is not about replacing teachers. It is about ensuring that every student has access to a qualified one.

How Can We Better Support and Empower Our Students Amid Today's American Education Issues?

Just like teachers and schools, students need more support than ever. In 2025, American public school students are still navigating disrupted learning, chronic absenteeism, and widespread academic gaps. Many are also facing challenges outside the classroom, including poverty, mental health concerns, and a lack of consistent adult support.

Empowering students in this environment requires targeted, responsive strategies that address their full learning experience

Uncover Areas of Student Need

Understanding student needs goes far beyond test scores. While assessment data plays a role, districts should also analyze classroom behavior, student feedback, surveys, and engagement levels to get a full picture of how students are doing.

Demographics also matter. Schools serving large numbers of multilingual learners or students with IEPs may need to adjust instruction, supports, and pacing to match those populations.

Most importantly, students themselves should have a voice. When districts create space for student perspectives—on what they need, how they learn, and what motivates them—they gain critical insight into how to build more inclusive and effective classrooms.

Ensure High-Quality, Engaging Teaching Opportunities
Instructional quality still matters most. Certified, experienced teachers who build relationships and deliver engaging lessons remain the most powerful influence on student success.

But as teacher shortages persist and budgets tighten, access to these educators is increasingly uneven. Many districts are relying on full-time substitutes or rotating vacancies that disrupt learning week after week.

Districts can improve instructional quality by supporting the teachers they do have and rethinking how to deliver high-quality instruction when traditional hiring isn't possible. In the face of persistent American education issues, many are turning to new instructional models that expand access to qualified teachers and reduce reliance on full-time substitutes. For example, with Elevate K-12, districts can livestream certified teachers directly into classrooms.

These teachers lead instruction while on-site staff manage the room, support behavior, and focus on student needs.

This model ensures instructional consistency and allows schools to retain in-person support without sacrificing teaching quality.

Implement Supportive Measures Based on Need

No two students are the same, which means supports must be responsive—not one-size-fits-all.

Differentiated instruction, small group learning, and targeted interventions can help close gaps and boost confidence—especially in schools disproportionately affected by American education issues like underfunding, high student-to-teacher ratios, and limited access to certified teachers.

Mental health services and tutoring are also critical, but they need to match student realities. Remote counseling, for instance, won't help students without internet access. Districts should consider multiple access points for support, including in-school, after-school, and community-based options.

Invest in Scalable, Replicable Models of Success

While some challenges are unique to individual schools, the most effective solutions are built to scale. Research has found that there are seven hallmarks of highly successful schools:

1. Clear and school-wide goals, principles, and expectations
2. Dedicated leaders who strive to help students and educators achieve those goals
3. High academic standards for students
4. Focus on emotional intelligence, personal responsibility, and empathy
5. Partnerships with families and communities
6. Meaningful professional development opportunities
7. Data-informed decision-making and measurements of success
8. School districts that prioritize these characteristics have the best chance of making lasting changes and achieving school-wide success.

One example is Paton-Churdan Community School District in Iowa.

After four years of declining science proficiency—from 73% to just 18%—the district partnered with Elevate K-12 to bring certified science instruction back into classrooms. Within one year of implementing LIVE teaching, student proficiency rebounded to 64%, nearly returning to pre-pandemic levels. In addition to academic growth, students reported stronger engagement, improved confidence, and a more connected classroom experience.

The key wasn't just the content. It was consistent, high-quality instruction delivered by a certified teacher who understood how to motivate and support students—despite the rural location and staffing barriers.

Tips for Fostering Inclusive Education in the U.S. Education System

Inclusion is not just an ideal. It is essential for student success.

Students from low-income households, multilingual learners, and those with disabilities continue to face systemic barriers that lead to lower academic outcomes. But with the right supports, these students can thrive.

Inclusive education means designing classrooms where every student feels seen, heard, and equipped to succeed, regardless of background, learning style, or ability.

Create Culturally Responsive Curricula

One of the most overlooked American education issues is the lack of cultural representation in curricula. Students are more likely to engage with classes that represent them and speak to their experiences and interests. Culturally responsive teaching helps validate students' identities, builds stronger connections, and increases participation.

Districts can promote inclusivity by encouraging teachers to incorporate a wide range of cultures, histories, and perspectives across subjects. This does not require a complete curriculum overhaul. Small shifts, such as diversifying reading lists, reframing historical narratives, or using locally relevant examples, can go a long way.

Feedback from students and families is key. Ask what is missing, what matters most to them, and how the curriculum could better reflect their lived experiences.

Implement Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Accessibility should be a starting point, not an afterthought.

Universal design for learning ensures that instruction is

designed to accommodate all learners from the beginning. That means providing multiple ways to access content, demonstrate understanding, and stay engaged.

Effective UDL practices include using flexible learning materials, integrating visuals and audio options, and ensuring all digital content meets accessibility standards. For districts using online tools, consider barriers such as language, connectivity, or assistive technology compatibility.

Inclusive design helps every student, not just those with identified needs.

Promote Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

As students progress through the school year, they acquire social and emotional skills in addition to knowledge. Just like traditional classroom topics, they should get support and resources to improve their empathy, relationship skills, and emotional intelligence.

One easy way to add SEL into the classroom is to offer more small-group and project-based learning. As students collaborate and explore subjects together, they learn how to hear different points of view, cooperate on tasks, and appreciate each other's skills and struggles.

Use Technology To Enhance Accessibility

Technology has the potential to level the playing field when it is designed and deployed with access in mind.

Tools like closed captioning, screen readers, adjustable font settings, and speech-to-text functions can empower students with disabilities and support multilingual learners. But not every product is built with inclusion in mind.

Before introducing a new platform or resource, ask: Can every student actually use this? Is it mobile-friendly? Does it work with the devices families already have? Does it support students with IEPs or limited internet?

If a tool is not accessible, it is not effective.

Moving Forward: A Path to Consistent, High-Quality Education

The challenges facing American education did not begin with the pandemic. But in 2025, they have reached a critical point. Staffing shortages, policy uncertainty, and persistent equity gaps have made it harder than ever for schools to deliver consistent, high-quality instruction.

Yet even in the face of urgent American education issues, there are real opportunities for progress.

Districts that embrace innovation and flexibility are finding new ways to support both students and teachers. With the right combination of instructional models, technology, and targeted support, schools can expand access to certified teachers, personalize learning, and improve outcomes for all students—regardless of zip code or staffing constraints.

Every student deserves access to a certified, qualified teacher in every subject. That belief is at the heart of what we do.

At Elevate K-12, we are using technology to deliver live, real-time instruction from experienced, certified educators. Our LIVE teaching model brings consistency, engagement, and instructional quality into classrooms that would otherwise go unfilled.

> ***"Learning is not attained by chance, it must be sought for with ardor and diligence."***
>
> *Abigail Adams*

Here's why we should pay attention to the Oklahoma State Chamber's annual survey

John Thompson, Oklahoma Voice, July 28, 2026

These days it feels increasingly easy to ignore survey results given the bombardment of people attempting to survey everything from most popular video games to most livable cities.

But I find myself hopeful that Oklahomans will pay attention to the 2026 findings of the State Chamber's annual Oklahoma Business Roundtable survey.

While it's designed to serve as "a guide for growth to the legislators who shape the state's economic and business development initiatives," this year's report is aptly named "Oklahoma Has Momentum, But Execution Matters."

This year's survey of Oklahoma's business leaders highlights the growing need for conversations between business leaders, educators and researchers. And, it lays out a roadmap for how those could set the stage for "win-win" solutions for both economic growth and provide meaningful learning to prepare students for the 21st century.

The survey found that 64% of the participants "believe Oklahoma is moving in the right direction relative to the national economy, and that 81% of businesses plan to hire in the coming year."

Most leaders said they "do not see taxes as their top barrier to growth," and nearly 60% said the state "should invest surplus funds in public priorities rather than return the money through tax cuts."

Moreover, workforce development and education are the top concerns, with 74% of those surveyed identifying those as one of the top two most important issues facing Oklahoma business growth.

Mark Funke, president of the Business Roundtable, said that "business leaders in the state clearly see education as the foremost issue."

He said that 89% of respondents "agreed the state should prioritize funding for education outcomes, particularly in elementary reading and math."

Getting into the details, 91.5% of survey participants agree that Oklahoma's CareerTech system does a good job preparing students for the workforce, and 76.8% say that universities do a good job preparing students for the workforce.

But not surprisingly, a huge majority find that high schools are falling short in preparing students for the workforce.

Thankfully, they identify childcare as a critical need, writing that "Childcare Is No Longer a Side Issue. It Is a Workforce Issue."

I hope they also understand that early education is more than a side issue for K-12 education, and that schools cannot be turned around without first investing in efforts that expand access to early childhood education along with mental and physical health services.

When I read the entire survey results, as opposed to the headlines about reading instruction theories, I'm reminded of my experiences in the inner circle of the MAPS for Kids project, which saved the Oklahoma City schools from financial collapse.

I was told from day one that our coalition needed to be completely apolitical and base our recommendations on high-quality education research and listening to the community.

One of the first lessons to be learned from scholarly research is that the key factor for teaching students to read is background information, which comes from reading books and from studying history, science, arts, music, and critical thinking.

It's most definitely not test prep, teaching to a test or basing the measure of a student's solely on a high-stakes standardized test.

I expect today's business people, who are also parents, would support research-based solutions.

Also, I expect that we could agree that we need to come together and think through the rapidly expanding benefits and harms of artificial intelligence.

If we can build better conversations between business people and educators, I believe we could build on that foundation.

When unveiling the survey, Funke said that nearly half of those surveyed said "workforce recruitment and retention is their greatest obstacle to increased profitability and growth."

Access to high-quality schools at all levels would improve those recruitment and retention rates.

And, a major key to getting there is to create public schools that prepare for success in the 21st century.

That requires schools that teach critical thinking and learning how to learn.

It requires mentorship.

It requires schools that bring kids out into diverse communities and brings a full range of adults into schools.

It requires shared cultures that enhance both an Oklahoma workforce environment that attracts and retains innovators and public schools that provide holistic, thoughtful, and innovative learning environments.

Oklahoma Ranks 5th Nationally For Preschool Access Falling more than 2,300 from the Previous Year

National Institute for Early Education Research

A new national report released today finds that Oklahoma ranks 5th in preschool access for 4-year-olds, up from 6th last year, despite a decrease in enrollment. The state ranked 27th in preschool access for 3-year-olds, down from 22nd last year. In 2024-2025 Oklahoma reached 65% of 4-year-olds and 3% of 3-year-olds. Oklahoma ranked 30th in state spending per child, up from 32nd last year. The state ranked 10th in all-reported spending per child which includes federal and local funding used for preschool.

The National Institute for Early Education Research's 2025 State of Preschool Yearbook presents a critical snapshot of preschool education in America. Currently, 44 states and DC fund preschool programs. Most state pre-K programs continue to primarily or only serve four-year-olds. Nationally, enrollment reached 37% of 4-year-olds but only 9% of 3-year-olds.

Additional Oklahoma findings for the 2024-2025 school year:

- Oklahoma preschool enrolled 36,114 children, a decrease of 2,343 from the prior year.
- State spending totaled $207,632,498, up $6,584,399 (3%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child equaled $5,749 in 2024-2025, up $521 from 2023-2024, adjusted for inflation.
- Oklahoma met 9 of 10 quality standards benchmarks.

"Preschool enrollment had declined in Oklahoma over the last decade. Preschool enrollment is more than 10 percentage points lower than its peak in 2014," said NIEER director Steve Barnett. "Oklahoma should focus on ensuring parents know this high-quality pre-K is available and important for children's future success to return enrollment to past higher levels."

Nationally, state support for preschool education hit record highs in enrollment and funding in 2024-2025. The pace of growth slowed, however, compared to the prior year, and many states continue to lag behind pre-pandemic enrollment levels.

Georgia's state-funded pre-K program for 4-year olds made history this year. It became the largest state-funded preschool program in the nation to meet all 10 quality benchmarks recommended by NIEER, and the first universal program to do so. Only 5 additional states meet all 10 of NIEER's research-based benchmarks for quality — Alabama, Hawaii, Michigan, Mississippi, and Rhode Island — in this year's report. None of those programs have the reach of Georgia's Pre-K Program. NIEER's benchmarks measure essential preschool quality indicators, including teacher qualifications, class sizes, early learning standards, and curriculum supports.

OKLAHOMA: 2025 NATIONAL RANKINGS

- Enrollment at age 4: 5th (65%)
- Enrollment at age 3: 27th (3%)
- State spending per child: 30th ($5,749)
- All reported spending per child: 10th ($12,433)
- Total benchmarks met: 9

"Oklahoma could soon join the list of states meeting all 10 benchmarks. The state's new pathways for assistant teachers for certification will help them meet this high quality mark and join Georgia as a universal state meeting all 10 benchmarks," said Allison Friedman-Krauss, the report's lead author.

States spent nearly $14.4 billion on preschool in 2024-2025. Twenty-eight states increased their investments in preschool from the prior year, for a total increase of $434 million, or 3%, adjusted for inflation. Including federal and local dollars, total spending was almost $17.7 billion. Three states each spent more than $1 billion last year: California ($4.1 billion), New Jersey ($1.2 billion), and New York ($1 billion). Together, these 3 states account for 45% of all state preschool spending. Texas adds almost another $1 billion.

Additional information about the 2025 State of Preschool Yearbook, including individual state profiles and maps, graphs, and state rankings, can be found at www.nieer.org.

The 2025 State of Preschool Yearbook was supported with funding from the Heising-Simons Foundation and the Gates Foundation.

The National Institute for Early Education Research at the Rutgers Graduate School of Education, New Brunswick, NJ, supports early childhood education policy and practice through independent, objective research and the translation of research to policy and practice.

Oklahoma schools beat national average in student attendance, report finds

Nuria Martinez-Keel, Oklahoma Voice, June 3, 2026

Often known for bottom-tier educational rankings, Oklahoma has improved over the national average in a critical area: student absenteeism.

Nineteen percent of Oklahoma students were chronically absent from school in the 2024-25 academic year, better than the nationwide average of 21%, according to a report issued Tuesday from Johns Hopkins University and the national nonprofit Attendance Works, which focuses on absenteeism issues.

A student is considered chronically absent after missing 10% or more of the school year for any reason.

The state's 19% chronic absenteeism rate matches that of both the 2023-24 school year and pre-pandemic levels, a benchmark many states have struggled to meet since the outbreak of COVID-19, according to the report, which combined state-level and federally collected data from 31 states.

Oklahoma State Department of Education data, though, indicates the state's 19% chronic absenteeism rate is still higher than before the pandemic. Annual state report cards found 81% of Oklahoma public school students were in good attendance in 2024-25, the most recent data available, compared to 86% in 2018-19 and 86.5% in 2017-18.

Most states are experiencing greater levels of high or extreme absences than before COVID-19, as well, the national report found. Meanwhile, the number of Oklahoma schools with high or extreme absences has declined even below rates seen in 2017-18, according to the report.

The report considered a school's absenteeism rate "high" when 20% to 29.9% of students were chronically absent and "extreme" when reaching 30% or more.

Large numbers of absences have "ripple effects" and indicate a school might need more intensive support and a more comprehensive approach to attendance issues, the report states.

"The churn in the classroom makes it more difficult for teachers to teach and affects the learning experience of all students," it states.

Maintaining strong attendance rates has been a priority in Kingfisher Public Schools. The district 50 miles northwest of Oklahoma City had 95% of its students in good attendance in 2024-25, and it maintained similarly high levels even after the COVID-19 outbreak, according to the Oklahoma State Report Cards, which measure chronic absenteeism levels in every public school.

Kingfisher Superintendent Andy Evans said school officials call parents, send letters home and even knock on families' doors as a student's absences increase. In more severe cases, the school will notify the county district attorney, who could prosecute students or their parents for truancy.

Usually the school counselor or assistant principal will "go find out what's going on in that child's life," he said.

"You've got to build that relationship with your kids that you know who they are and you know where they are," Evans said. "You've got to make sure you're listening to what the causes of the attendance problems are."

He said CareerTech vocational classes and concurrent college enrollment have helped Kingfisher maintain strong attendance rates among its high school students, an age group that tends to show higher levels of chronic absenteeism.

The most important factor influencing good or bad attendance, he said, is "the value of the education to a person."

"The ability of students to get to school is directly proportional to the students being able to read on grade level, and it's extremely proportional to the students' ability to do math on grade level," Evans said. "If they're not here, they're not going to be on grade level."

Despite beating the national average, Oklahoma still gave itself a D grade for chronic absenteeism in its annual statewide report card for 2024-25. About 95% of Oklahoma students would have to be in good attendance for the state to give itself an A, according to the report card.

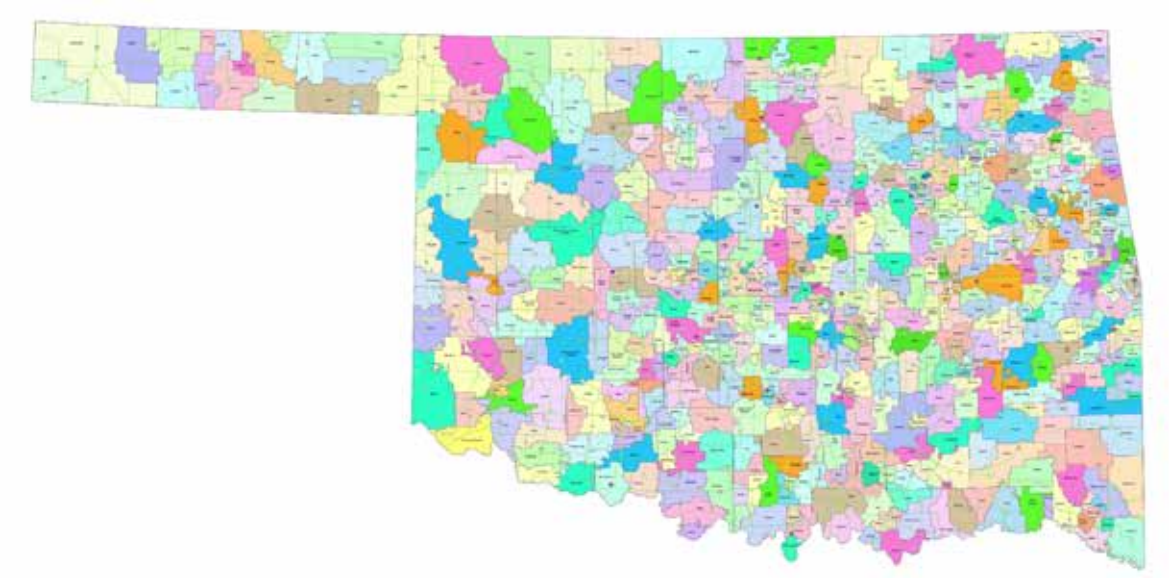
However, a school's attendance rate won't count against its A-F grade on the 2025-26 Oklahoma School Report Cards, which haven't been released yet.

State lawmakers in 2025 removed chronic absenteeism from school performance evaluations. They said parents, not schools, are ultimately responsible for whether children have good attendance.

The state still will include chronic absenteeism in yearly report cards as a non-graded metric, an Education Department spokesperson confirmed.

How Curious: Why Does Oklahoma Have So Many School Districts?

Claire Donnelly, KGOU, December 10, 2018



Oklahoma school districts 2018- 2019. Boundaries based on information provided by the Oklahoma Department of Education. Center for Spatial Analysis/University of Oklahoma

Oklahoma has more than 500 school districts--up to three times more than some states with similar student populations. KGOU listener Beverly Funderburk emailed How Curious and asked: "How did Oklahoma end up with so many districts?"

Jim Machell, Dean of the College of Education and Professional Studies at the University of Central Oklahoma, made a list of Oklahoma school districts organized by student population.

Oklahoma's two largest districts are at the top of the list: Oklahoma City Public Schools and Tulsa Public Schools, each with between 40,000 and 45,000 students. The bottom of the list shows about 400 districts with fewer than 1,000 students apiece.

"I was surprised to learn that there are 29 school districts in the state that serve fewer than 100 students, which to me, is just baffling," Machell said.

Oklahoma also has a large number of school superintendents.

According to Machell, the state could save about $27 million by combining, or consolidating, some smaller school districts into bigger ones and reducing the overall number of superintendents. He said fewer superintendent salaries would mean more available school funding.

Emily Wendler, education reporter at StateImpact Oklahoma, said it's misleading to argue Oklahoma spends more money on administration because it has more school districts.

"According to U.S. Census data, that's not true at all," Wendler said.

She said while Oklahoma spends the same amount or more on superintendent salaries than other states with similar student populations, like Kentucky, Louisiana, Alabama and South Carolina, it spends less on overall administration.

Wendler said superintendents in smaller districts often hold other positions ranging from school principal to bus driver.

"[If] you consolidated two districts with 100 students and you had two superintendents wearing lots of different hats, it's not like you just all of a sudden have one superintendent wearing all those hats," Wendler said.

She said the district may have to find other people to do those jobs after consolidation.

Some people argue focusing on the number of districts is a distraction from other education issues, like teacher recruitment and salaries.

Early Schools

The history of Oklahoma's school districts starts with the 1889 Land Run, when the U.S. government opened up land in the state for white settlement after forcing out Native Americans. The federal government did not provide rules for early settlers.

In 1890, U.S. officials created Oklahoma Territory and borrowed laws from Nebraska before state officials started making school laws for Oklahoma.

According to Larry Johnson, special collections manager for the Metropolitan Library System, most early schools were subscription schools, meaning those who wanted education had to pay for it themselves. Oklahoma then started a school land system, in which towns would lease land to farmers and ranchers to fund schools.

In addition to district superintendents, each county had its own elected countywide superintendent. It was an effort to decentralize the school system and maintain local control, but Johnson said the politics of the job caused problems.

"Those were the days of machine politics and patronage and corruption," he said.

Teacher and administrator quality varied greatly because elected superintendents could give school jobs to friends and supporters as rewards. A district could also set its own property tax rate to determine school funding, which often led to inequity.

"I read one thing that said only 25 percent of the schools had a United States map," Johnson said.

By The Numbers

Oklahoma had just under 6,000 school districts when it became a state in 1907 because state law required it to provide free public schools and free transportation within a two mile radius.

In 1947, lawmakers decided to consolidate any school with fewer than eight pupils and did so for 1,600 districts, bringing the state's total number to nearly 4,000 districts.

Larry Johnson of the Metropolitan Library said it was a major victory for lawmakers, but led to resentment in rural areas, like in Dewey County where his father was raised.

"His neighbors and family and friends all gathered at the local school for their Christmas party, for the ice cream social, for weddings. Any type of community event they would have at the school," Johnson said.

Communities lost these gathering places when schools closed.

In 1955, Oklahoma lawmakers considered a measure on school integration called the Better Schools Amendment.

Johnson said this measure incentivized districts to integrate and consolidate by allowing integrated schools to keep the funding from their composite segregated schools.

The amendment passed and the number of school districts gradually shrank.

According to the Oklahoma State Department of Education, the state had around 600 districts in 1989.

Through the years, the Oklahoma Legislature has passed bills aimed at incentivizing and assisting with consolidation. The state now has 540 districts, including charter school districts.

Town Hall Editor's Note Update

OSDE Fast Facts for the 2025-2026 School Year:

- 541 School Districts
  - ◊ 506 Traditional School Districts
  - ◊ 35 Charter School Districts
- 60% of Oklahoma public schools are classified as rural
- 42,543 Certified Teachers for SY26 Down 725 from SY25
- 16.2:1 Student-Teacher Ratio
- 332:1 Student-Counselor Ratio.
  - ◊ American School Counselor Ratio Recommends 250:1

More Than a TV Station: OETA's Educational Legacy in Oklahoma

Lynn Thompson, Oklahoma Academy Research Committee

For more than 70 years, the Oklahoma Educational Television Authority has served as one of Oklahoma's most important educational institutions — not through traditional classrooms alone, but through a statewide network designed to bring learning, culture, public safety, and civic engagement to every corner of the state.

As lawmakers debate the future of OETA following the failed override of Gov. Kevin Stitt's veto of legislation extending the agency, the conversation has increasingly centered on whether public broadcasting remains a core function of state government.

For many educators, families, and community leaders across Oklahoma, the answer is yes.

OETA's history is deeply rooted in education.

In fact, Oklahoma was a national pioneer in educational television. In 1951, the Oklahoma Legislature unanimously approved a resolution urging the Federal Communications Commission to reserve television channels specifically for educational purposes. Two years later, Oklahoma became the first state in the nation to establish a statewide educational television authority through legislation signed by Gov. Johnston Murray.

When OETA officially signed on the air on April 13, 1956, it became the Southwest's second educational television station and the twentieth educational television station in the United States.

Its original mission was clear: use broadcasting to expand educational opportunity statewide.

That mission remains just as relevant today.

From the beginning, OETA worked directly with educational institutions and the Oklahoma State Department of Education to provide televised instructional courses for academic credit. In many ways, the network was decades ahead of modern distance learning initiatives.

Over time, OETA evolved into Oklahoma's only statewide coordinated instructional and public television network, eventually expanding to four transmitters and a network of translator stations capable of reaching all 77 counties, including many rural areas with limited access to educational resources. By 2000, the network reached approximately 1.8 million viewers throughout Oklahoma and surrounding states.

Today, OETA continues to provide educational programming that supports both children and adults through curriculum-based content, PBS KIDS programming, documentaries, cultural programming, public affairs coverage, teacher resources, and lifelong learning opportunities.

Programs such as Sesame Street and Mister Rogers' Neighborhood became foundational educational tools for generations of Oklahoma children, particularly in early literacy, emotional development, and school readiness.

That educational support is especially important in Oklahoma today.

The state continues to face significant educational challenges, including low proficiency rates in reading and math, chronic absenteeism, workforce readiness concerns, and disparities between urban and rural educational access. In many communities, particularly rural Oklahoma, students and families may have fewer enrichment opportunities, fewer early childhood resources, and less reliable broadband access.

OETA helps bridge those gaps.

Unlike subscription-based streaming platforms or private educational services, OETA provides free access to educational content regardless of income level or geography. Whether a child lives in Oklahoma City, Guymon, Hugo, or Boise City, educational programming remains accessible through traditional broadcasting infrastructure.

That matters in a state where not every family has equal access to broadband internet, digital devices, or supplemental educational resources.

The debate surrounding OETA has also brought increased attention to how the organization is funded — and what taxpayer support for the network actually looks like.

Contrary to the perception that OETA operates entirely on state dollars, the organization functions as a public-private partnership supported through multiple funding streams. Community support from individual donors represents the largest portion of OETA's funding at approximately 34%. Investments account for another 28%, while Oklahoma state appropriations represent about 19% of total funding. Federal support through the Corporation for Public Broad-

casting provides approximately 11%, with the remaining 8% coming from other sources.

In other words, more than 80% of OETA's funding comes from sources outside direct state appropriations.

That funding structure has existed in various forms since the organization's earliest days. When OETA was first established, lawmakers authorized the agency but did not initially provide operational funding because they believed private donations should support expenses. At that critical moment, Oklahoma Publishing Company founder Edward K. Gaylord donated $150,000 to help launch the network and ensure its survival.

That tradition of public-private support continues today through viewer contributions, charitable giving, foundation support, federal partnerships, and state investment.

Supporters argue that the state appropriation portion of OETA funding is not simply subsidizing television programming. Rather, they believe those dollars help maintain educational infrastructure, statewide broadcast capabilities, emergency communication systems, and universal access to educational resources that would otherwise not exist in many parts of Oklahoma.

The network also plays a critical role in public safety communications through the PBS Warning, Alert, and Response Network (WARN) system, helping distribute severe weather alerts, AMBER Alerts, Silver Alerts, and emergency information statewide. Lawmakers supporting OETA have emphasized that traditional broadcasting infrastructure remains essential during emergencies, particularly when cellular or broadband systems fail.

In 2024, lawmakers even appropriated $3 million in one-time funding specifically to strengthen OETA's infrastructure and emergency communications capabilities.

Critics, including Gov. Stitt, have argued that if Oklahomans value OETA, private donations and sponsorships should sustain it without taxpayer support. However, public television stations operate under strict Federal Communications Commission guidelines that prohibit traditional commercial advertising models used by private broadcasters. Instead, stations rely on regulated sponsorship messaging, grants, donations, and public investment.

Supporters of OETA counter that educational access, emergency communication systems, cultural preservation, and public service broadcasting have long been viewed as legitimate public investments — particularly in rural states where private media markets often do not adequately serve smaller communities.

Beyond children's programming, OETA also supports civic understanding and Oklahoma storytelling through local productions such as Oklahoma Passage, Gallery America, Oklahoma Gardening, Oklahoma Wildlife, and Oklahoma News Report. These programs help preserve Oklahoma history, culture, agriculture, arts, and public affairs conversations in ways that commercial broadcasting often does not prioritize.

The recent legislative debate has now placed OETA's future in uncertainty. Without legislative reauthorization, the agency faces a path toward closure by July 1, 2027, despite lawmakers funding operations for the upcoming fiscal year.

Still, many Oklahoma leaders believe the discussion surrounding OETA reflects a larger question about the future of public education and civic infrastructure itself.

What role should a state play in ensuring equal access to educational resources, trusted information, cultural programming, and emergency communications?

For generations, OETA has attempted to answer that question by serving every Oklahoma community — urban and rural alike.

And for many families, educators, and communities across the state, that mission remains worth preserving.

Oklahoma Public Education: Charting a Path Forward

Shawn Hime, Ph.D., Oklahoma State School Boards Association

Education is a 14-year journey for every child. It is also an ongoing pursuit of excellence for every school district and an investment in Oklahoma's future. So why do we so often govern it one legislative session at a time, driven by annual rankings, election cycles and short-term political priorities?

Every legislative session brings hundreds of proposals intended to improve education. Some focus on funding. Others emphasize accountability, governance, curriculum, expanded educational opportunities or new approaches to measuring success. Some are thoughtful, research-based solutions. Others are short-lived policy trends that move from state to state.

Regardless of their origin, meaningful educational improvement rarely happens on a legislative timetable. Education is not simply another line item in the state budget — it is an investment in Oklahoma's future workforce, economy and communities.

Education policy should be measured by whether it improves student outcomes over time — not simply by whether it generates headlines during the next legislative session. The policies adopted today — whether related to funding, instructional practices, educator preparation, accountability or school choice — will shape a student's educational experience for years to come.

Innovation is essential, but lasting educational success is rarely the result of a single initiative. It is built through years of steady implementation, continuous evaluation, adequate resources and a willingness to stay the course.

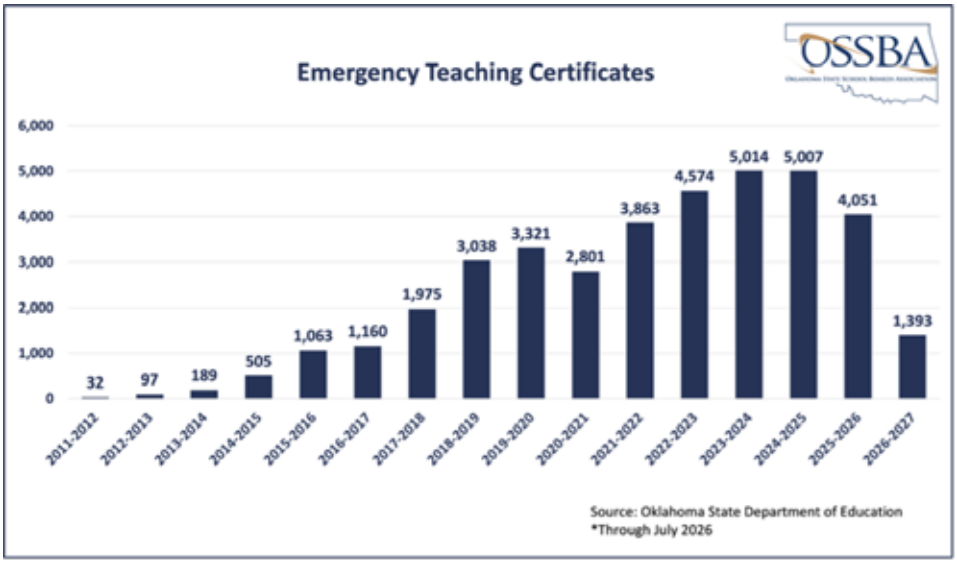
How We Got Here

Between 2010 and 2018, Oklahoma public education experienced one of the most difficult periods in its history. During that time:

- State funding through Oklahoma's education funding formula declined by 8%, while inflation increased 15%.
- Teacher salaries fell behind surrounding states.
- Thousands of educators left the profession or crossed state lines for better pay.
- Districts struggled to recruit and retain qualified teachers.
- Programs were reduced, class sizes increased and schools were forced to do more with fewer resources.
- While Oklahoma reduced its investment, neighboring states continued increasing theirs. The gap widened year after year.

The consequences were predictable. Oklahoma's teacher supply exceeded demand in 2010. But over the next 15 years, Oklahoma grappled with a full-blown teacher shortage crisis that has yet to fully subside. Districts to struggled retain experienced teachers, and the number of college students pursuing education as a profession plummeted. Issuing emergency teaching certificates thousands of college graduates without an education background and to teachers working with students outside their subject area expertise became a critical way to fill the gap.

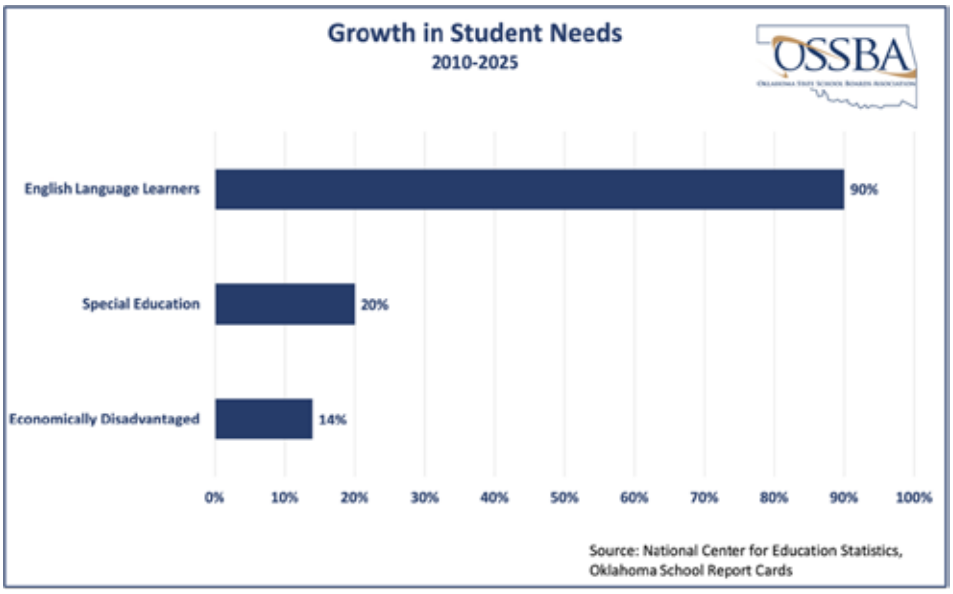
Not only did lower investment contribute to extraordinary teacher shortages, students also had fewer educational opportunities and academic outcomes declined. Those challenges were not the result of a lack of commitment by educators or students. They reflected years of underinvestment and inconsistent policymaking.



Those challenges have also been compounded by the realities Oklahoma schools face every day. In 2024, Oklahoma's public schools served:

- Students receiving free or reduced lunch, an indicator of poverty: 437,231
- Students on an individualized education plan: 116,481
- Students who are English language learners: 74,618

Many districts serve high percentages of students living in poverty, educate growing numbers of students with special needs and provide increasing levels of mental health and behavioral support. These factors do not lower expectations for student achievement, but they do require additional expertise, staffing and resources to ensure every student has the opportunity to succeed.

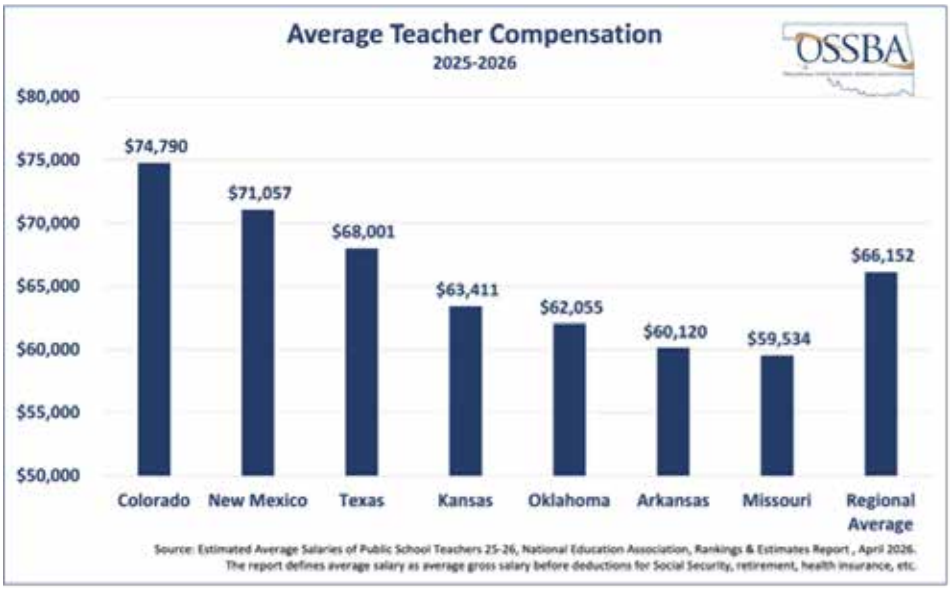


Progress is Possible

That period left Oklahoma with significant challenges—but it also made clear what needed to change. Beginning in 2019, Oklahoma began reversing course.

From 2019 through 2026, public education received approximately $2 billion in additional funding. Those resources have allowed districts to begin rebuilding programs, improving teacher compensation and addressing years of deferred needs.

One of Oklahoma's clearest successes has been improving teacher pay.



More competitive salaries help schools recruit new educators, retain experienced teachers and reduce costly turnover. While Oklahoma still has room for improvement, it has moved from last in the region on average teacher compensation to a far more competitive position.

These gains demonstrate what is possible when Oklahoma makes a sustained commitment to public education.

Despite improvement, Oklahoma continues to trail neighboring states in overall investment per student.

Even after recent funding increases:

- Oklahoma remains last among surrounding states in per-student funding.
- The regional average exceeds Oklahoma's investment by nearly $2,900 per student.
- Closing that gap would require billions of dollars in sustained funding over many years.

These facts do not diminish the progress Oklahoma has made. Instead, they demonstrate that decades of underinvestment cannot be erased in just a few legislative sessions.

A New Course

Oklahoma's next challenge is no longer identifying the problems. It is maintaining a consistent strategy long enough to solve them.

Too often, priorities shift with changes in legislative leadership or political trends. Schools begin implementing new initiatives only to see those efforts replaced before meaningful results can be measured.

As Oklahoma's districts struggle under the weight of the teacher shortage, they have had little choice but to hire thousands of teachers who have not completed traditional certification requirements. Yet despite the scale of the challenge, Oklahoma still lacks a comprehensive, long-term strategy to strengthen teacher preparation and accelerate support for novice educators.

At the same time, Oklahoma expanded private school choice with little accountability. Meanwhile, the public schools that serve the overwhelming majority of Oklahoma students are saddled with costly red tape and new

EDUCATION INVESTMENT GAP

STATE	CURRENT SPENDING	ENROLLMENT	PER STUDENT	GAP*
New Mexico	$5,549,346	311,719	$17,802	$3,955,415,097
Colorado	$13,782,834	865,661	$15,922	$2,641,287,701
Kansas	$7,179,324	483,505	$14,848	$1,890,996,328
Missouri	$12,982,649	891,248	$14,567	$1,694,518,560
Arkansas	$6,700,100	484,978	$13,815	$1,169,361,979
Texas	$71,352,626	5,532,518	$12,897	$527,680,950
Oklahoma	$8,484,207	698,761	$12,142	
Region			$14,975	$1,979,876,769

Source: National Center for Education Statistics FY 24 Revenues and Expenditures for Public Elementary and Secondary Education (April 2026)
*The investment gap is how much Oklahoma would need to invest to reach the per-student investment of other states.
**Current expenditures includes instruction, instruction-related, support services, and other elementary/secondary expenditures regardless of funding source, but excludes expenditures on capital outlay, other programs and interest on long-term debt.

OSSBA

mandates. Add declining birth rates to the mix, and these competing pressures place Oklahoma at an important crossroads.

If Oklahoma is serious about improving student outcomes, we must develop, fund and execute a long-term strategic plan that:

- Establishes clear statewide goals for student achievement.
- Is developed with meaningful input from educators, parents, business leaders, higher education, policymakers and other stakeholders.
- Invests in proven, research-based instructional practices.
- Provides stable, predictable funding commitments.
- Gives educators sufficient time to implement reforms with fidelity.
- Measures success over years rather than legislative sessions.
- Creates equitable accountability for every school receiving public funding, whether directly or indirectly.

Looking Forward

Sustained improvement requires sustained commitment. Oklahoma has already shown that positive change is possible, and accomplishments deserve recognition. But they should also serve as motivation to continue the work.

Closing the regional funding gap, strengthening the educator workforce and improving student outcomes will require continued investment, patience and the discipline to maintain research-based strategies long enough for them to succeed.

Tens of thousands of Oklahoma children will enter pre-kindergarten this fall and spend the next 14 years in our public schools. The decisions we make today will shape that entire journey. If we commit to a long-term vision, provide consistent support and stay the course, today's students will become tomorrow's success stories—and Oklahoma will be stronger for generations to come.

What's right in Oklahoma education

Brent Haken, State Director, Oklahoma Department of Career and Technology Education

It's easy to get lost in the uproar about what's wrong with education in Oklahoma. The issues are real and disturbing. But there's another story—one that's far too often overlooked. It's the story of students finding purpose, educators sparking transformation, and communities rallying together to build a brighter future.

Something is going right in Oklahoma education—and CareerTech is a big part of it.

Across our state, students of all ages are gaining skills that matter. They're learning to weld, to code, to care for patients, to manage projects, and to launch businesses. They're stepping into the real world with real experience—often before they've even graduated high school. This is what happens when education is relevant, hands-on, and connected directly to careers.

This is what Oklahoma CareerTech does best.

As state director of Oklahoma CareerTech, I see success stories every day. A high school junior who earns a professional credential and steps into a job that pays well above minimum wage. A young adult who trains in aerospace maintenance and lands a career with a major defense contractor. A parent who returns to school to gain the skills needed to reenter the workforce with confidence and dignity.

This is workforce development in action. And it's happening right here, right now.

Our state faces serious workforce shortages in key industries—healthcare, manufacturing, transportation, and education, to name a few. But CareerTech is bridging those gaps. We're aligning programs with employer needs, responding to economic shifts, and building pipelines that prepare Oklahomans not just for jobs, but for sustainable careers.

And we're not doing it alone.

CareerTech thrives on partnerships—with local school districts, higher education, tribal nations, business leaders, and policymakers. These partnerships aren't just symbolic; they're producing tangible results. Businesses are shaping the curriculum. Schools are expanding access to career training. Communities are investing in programs that keep talent local. The great part is you don't have to just take my word for it. In a report released in May of 2024 the American Institute for Research (AIR) released the indicators from 20 years of research highlighting the value of CTE in High school experiences.

The study concluded: CTE participation is growing around the country. According to the most recent data (2019), nearly 85 percent of public and private high school graduates earned at least one credit in a CTE course. Until recently, however, little was known about the causal effects of CTE on students. The report's literature review and synthesis used the What Works Clearinghouse definition of causal CTE studies to provide an important summary of the most rigorous evidence from the past 20 years. Findings from the synthesis of 28 studies include:

- **CTE has statistically significant positive impacts on several high school outcomes**, such as students' academic achievement, high school completion, employability skills, and college readiness. There is no discernible impact on student discipline or attendance.
- **Students who take CTE are more likely to enroll in 2-year colleges compared to those who do not take CTE.** However, no differences were found for enrollment in 4-year colleges and progressing in college. There is also no impact on the likelihood of completing a college degree.
- **Those who take CTE courses in high school are also more likely to be employed after high school than those who did not.** However, CTE course-takers had similar earnings as those who did not take CTE.
- **The Network team found no statistically significant negative impacts** of CTE participation.

Currently, in Oklahoma we have 151,000 students taking one CTE course per year and another 24,000 high school students taking half day post-secondary programs concurrently with over 10,000 adults. All together this system hosts more than 520,000 enrollments each year in Oklahoma CareerTech programs. In fiscal year 2024, Oklahoma CareerTech students earned 34,771 industry certifications. These aren't just numbers. These are people. These are futures. For example, Miriam McFarland's passion for healthcare has been a guiding force throughout her life. After graduating high school, she worked as a hospital housekeeper, porter and nurse tech. Those jobs gave her a

glimpse into the medical field, but it was one coworker who changed everything.

"My absolute favorite coworker was a respiratory therapist," McFarland said. "She took me under her wing, encouraged me and always told me I could do anything I put my mind to. After watching her, I finally said, 'I think I could do that,' and I never looked back."

Inspired, she enrolled in the respiratory care program at Francis Tuttle Technology Center, offered in partnership with Oklahoma City Community College. There, she combined classroom instruction, hands-on lab work and clinical experience to prepare for her boards and earn a certification as a registered respiratory therapist.

"The in-class lectures, hands-on lab time and clinical rounding gave me the knowledge to be successful," she said. "We learned the necessities of the job, how to speak up and to never stop learning."

Today, McFarland works at SSM Health St. Anthony Hospital. She finds deep purpose in helping patients breathe easier and in building trust with families and medical teams. Beyond the technical skills, CareerTech gave her confidence, stability and the opportunity to build a better future for herself and her family.

"Get involved, build great relationships and take in everything they're willing to teach you," she advises students considering CareerTech. "The hands-on experience you gain in class will transfer to your future career and put you ahead of the curve in many situations."

Her journey is one of thousands across Oklahoma; proof that CareerTech isn't just about earning a certification. It's about opening doors, building confidence and creating futures. And the numbers show it does all that at a fraction of the cost of other educational routes.

For students and taxpayers alike, CareerTech delivers high-value credentials and life-changing opportunities. Sometimes, the smarter investment isn't the most expensive. It's the one that pays off in both lives and livelihoods.

Of course, challenges remain. We must continue to invest in modern facilities, cutting-edge equipment, and the educators who make it all possible. We must ensure that rural and underserved communities have access to the same opportunities as those in more populated areas. And we must continue telling the story of what's working—because it deserves to be told.

There's plenty of work ahead, and we need to serve more students. But when we talk about education in Oklahoma, let's also talk about the progress we're making. Let's recognize that our students are earning credentials, our businesses are hiring CareerTech graduates, and our communities are growing stronger because of it.

This is more than just education. This is Oklahoma's workforce, our economy, and our future.

And that's what's right in Oklahoma education.

> ***"I'm a mom, and my view of public education begins and ends with the fundamental question: Is this good for children?"***
>
> *Campbell Brown*

Letting Winners Win

Brent Haken, State Director, Oklahoma Department of Career and Technology Education

No matter the sport, we are drawn to the winners and wonder how they did it. We analyze everything from roster development to management decisions, schedules, play calling, and even the environment that surrounds a team. Each level of competition is governed by a set of rules and guardrails, and then we watch in astonishment as a season unfolds.

In America, we are enamored with the entertainment of sporting events. Those in the "game" learn from each other constantly. Coaches, players, and owners— all learning from decisions and investing where they believe it matters most. It's not always about having the most money or resources. It is about making your resources work!

We all watched the Oklahoma City Thunder build this model. Invest in the overlooked and undervalued and build something that is performing at the top level. It is a spectacle of beauty to watch something built from the ground up and then win!

And yet the lesson is bigger than basketball.
The game we are really playing is the livelihood of our people. Education that fosters tenacity, perseverance, and service to one another is the key to long-term prosperity. At one time, America did this better than anyone. That is, until we drifted from our foundation and lost focus.

I am convinced that if we simplify expectations, enable creativity, and allow excellence to be recognized and rewarded, we will see more growth. Winning is not the goal. Winning is the outcome of disciplined work.

In this brief writing, I cannot address every policy or rule that should be reconsidered, but I believe there is a clear path forward where Oklahoma schools, communities, and students can thrive.

Speaking of thriving, I cannot help but think about food. Whether it is the growing national focus on health and wellness, or the photos from summer vacations filled with meals and family gatherings, food is one of the most foundational contributors to productivity and well-being.
Yet in schools, we often reduce it to compliance. Budget constraints, regulations, and making sure meals meet requirements rather than asking whether they truly serve students well.

Let's be honest: no child is fighting obesity because of school meals. Still, we have built systems that lean heavily toward prepackaged, processed, heat-and-serve models that do not always reflect what students need to perform at their best.

This is not a critique of our child nutrition heroes. They are working within the system they have. The issue is that we have struggled to move from regulation to best practice. Food is our first key to school success. There is growing research that supports this, including findings highlighted by Michelle Connolly and others that show the strong connection between nutrition, behavior, and academic performance.

We must also recognize that most students are not regularly exposed to nutrient-rich, home-style meals, and it will take time for them to adhere. Additionally, the traditional model of breakfast before school may not meet students where they are. Many students arrive right before the bell. We have to consider that this model may need to adjust.

I can assure you the first step and most overlooked strategy to improving behavior and increase aptitude and for goodness' sake, teacher sanity is to feed them enough good food. Once students' basic needs are met, their bellies are full, what do we change next?

It may not be popular, but I'm going to say it, strict, consistent and understood discipline. Often viewed only as punishment, discipline frequently becomes a flashpoint for parent frustration and misunderstanding—because their baby would never! However, clearly established expectations, paired with swift and consistent consequences—beginning in early childhood education make all the difference. These expectations carry forward from elementary to high school and ultimately into the workplace.

To understand this better, we must step back and examine the design of a school and dig into our roles.

Public school districts begin with a board elected by the community. That board establishes policy, and the staff operates within that framework. The school is one of the most important public service institutions in a community, and it should reflect community values.

The board hires a superintendent to ensure those policies are carried out effectively. While boards should listen to the community, their responsibility is not to manage day-to-day

operations or implement change based on a small subset of interest request, but to ensure the system stays aligned to its mission and values.

District leadership must then carry out those policies across the system. Supporting principals, coaching school leaders, and ensuring consistency. That includes engagement with parents, civic leaders, and business partners to build shared understanding around expectations and outcomes.

Discipline is not simply punishment. It is student-outcome focused.

The board sets expectations. District leadership implements systems. Building leaders implement, support and enforce those expectations at the school level. It is so important to understand these roles as we continue to undermine the classroom because schools lack the structure to defend great classroom discipline.

When that structure breaks down, classrooms feel it immediately.

We allow poor behavior at times. Not because educators lack care, but because systems are not always strong enough to support them. Educators fear student and parent discourse and the result is visible in classrooms across the state. I regularly hear stories of appalling behavior that is not dealt with accordingly and in repetition leads to good teachers exiting the profession.

There are many tools available to build positive school environments, but accountability must return to the center of classroom culture. Principals, much of this burden is on you, but the reward of helping a student find a path to their success is the most humbling of all.

Speaking of the principal, if there is one area that deserves more attention, it is building-level leadership development. While I wish I could expand more on strategies for early literacy, numeracy, project-based learning, career exposure, student engagement, and parent involvement, they all ultimately converge at the school leadership level. We must do a better job preparing and supporting principals. Yes, that job is over whelming!

Building leaders are expected to manage discipline—a problem that I stressed is fairly easily solved (if the board has some fortitude), the scheduling, staffing, substitutes, curriculum implementation, data analysis, instructional strategies, and community engagement—all of that and – all at once.

I say often, there rarely was a teacher that entered a classroom that wasn't on fire to make a difference for their students when they came in. But who stokes the fire when it needs it, who adds a log, or more important at times sets the damper?

Some of you may read this and think I value a teacher, bus driver, para less than I should, and I hope you believe me when I say that is definitely not the case. Their work is essential. But without strong leadership supporting the system around them, even the best efforts become harder to sustain.

That is the role of leadership.

I have had the privilege of serving in many roles throughout education—high school teacher, elementary administrator, special education director, high school administrator, district leader, and now as a state leader in career and technical education.

What I see now is that we have over complicated school. When we look at Oklahoma CareerTech and recognize this system as a national leader we don't have to wonder why. We focus on the "Improvement" model of accreditation; the programs are built to meet community demand and at all levels from student to teacher and on to district leadership we demand support for one another. The guidelines are simple, the data is transparent and the outcomes are known. Education does not have to be as complicated as we sometimes make it.

Let winners win. Build on each other's success and people will thrive.

Stitt releases study from departed Secretary of Education

Sidney Lee, Quorum Call, August 16, 2026

Last year, Gov. Kevin Stitt charged then-Secretary of Education Daniel Hamlin to review specific aspects of Oklahoma's education system, including school carryover dollars, funding for charter schools and in-person instructional days.
While Hamlin left the position inJuly, the completed report from Hamlin, created with support from the Office of Educational Quality and Accountability, is now available.

Hamlin's summary of the report closes with note of caution: Any policy decision made by lawmakers in relation to education financing should be considered carefully with a great deal of study into all possible impacts to schools, teachers and, ultimately, students.

"Some options likely require refinement, modification, or additional analysis to make certain that they are appropriately tailored to Oklahoma's public education system. Even where revisions are necessary, the findings in this report provide a foundation for continued inquiry and action to strengthen school finance in Oklahoma," Hamlin stated at the end of his summary.

All of Hamlin's suggestions in the study would require legislative changes, and some of the suggestions have been supported by Stitt and some factions within the Legislature for years.

Hamlin's suggestion to allow brick-and-mortar charter schools to access local property taxes is one such example.

It is not new information that public charters receive less public funding per student compared to traditional public schools. According to Hamlin's report, 15 of the state's 33 charter schools are among the 40 schools with the lowest per-pupil funding in the state.

Oklahomans, including lawmakers, have not been thrilled with the idea of local tax dollars going to charter school infrastructure, especially if that infrastructure is not owned by the school. Another argument is that opening local tax dollars to charter schools allows students who do not live in a tax district to be funded through that district's dollars.

Hamlin suggests opponents can no longer make this argument because of relatively new laws around open enrollment.

"As a result, locally generated property tax revenue supports local schools serving transfer students whose families live and pay taxes in another district. Little policy justification arguably exists to exclude charter schools from access to local property taxes," the study states.

The reality of open enrollment is a little more nuanced, as Hamlin and OEQA staff and governing body know from a report one Oklahoma open enrollment given to the body two months before Hamlin left Oklahoma.

Traditional public schools are not, by-and-large, actively recruiting students to their districts and there is even some suggestion that some districts are trying to actively discourage families from accessing open enrollment.

But while charters are trying to actively grow, both in student population and infrastructure, many public schools can access the money needed for facilities, but not necessarily for regular operational expenses.

In the report, Hamlin suggests lifting current funding restrictions on how school bonds can be used:

"Bond proceeds are not permitted to pay for continuing expenses, such as teacher salaries. Given this restriction, a school district in the state may be experiencing severe teacher shortages, struggling to offer competitive salaries, or eliminating instructional programs while simultaneously issuing substantial bonds for facilities, football stadiums, locker rooms, and other capital projects. A school could build multi-million-dollar STEM and science labs but then lack qualified teachers to staff these same labs. While capital projects may still ultimately yield benefits to students and communities, they may not generate the highest value for the expenditure, whereas high-quality classroom teachers are consistently associated with stronger outcomes."

Hamlin suggests allowing districts to use bond funds to create endowments of similar long-term dedicated funding mechanisms for instructional expenses like teacher compensation.

District administrators have been interested in opening up how bond funding can be used, but they've also been leery or connecting recurring, and often regularly growing, costs to bond issues that are be set once a vote is passed and, if the community does not approve a bond, could disappear.

Hamlin's suggestion would add some extra layers that could address these worries. But this change would likely make local tax dollars more precious to local districts that are already uninterested in sharing those precious funds with charters.

Hamlin's other two areas of focus come with more policy recommendations.

In-person instructional days are an area Hamlin had publicly discussed more than once, and he was a vocal supporter of HB3151.

HB3151, by Rep. Rob Hall, R-Tulsa, and Senate President Pro Tempore Lonnie Paxton, R-Tuttle, removes a school district's ability to count up to 30 hours of teacher professional development toward the 181 required school days. It removes the ability of a school district to count up to 12 hours annually, used for parent-teacher conferences, as classroom instruction time.

OEQA staff chose 12 school districts at random for their review of district calendars and found varying amounts of discrepancies between what the districts reported to the Oklahoma State Department of Education (SDE) and the calendar given to parents in relation to overall instructional days and virtual instructional days.

"These patterns highlight the need for a more systematic statewide approach to collecting, verifying, and publicly reporting in-person, virtual, and other instructional days. Given the growth in per-pupil funding in recent years and the persistence of low student achievement in many districts, all students should receive the full amount of in-person instructional days," the study states.

There were three policy suggestions. The first was to prohibit SDE from giving waivers to the instructional day minimums to any school site receiving below an 'A' rating on the Oklahoma School Report Card. Second, SDE should perform a random audit of districts each year on school calendars. Third, SDE should establish new reporting requirements on each individual aspect of a school calendar.

This connects to one of the challenging but likely to be the most popular sections of the study; review of the Oklahoma Cost Accounting System (OCAS).

OCAS is a universally disliked necessary evil for most Oklahomans connected in any way, shape or form to education finance.

The system was created to bring accountability, transparency and efficiency to school financing and the many reporting requirements placed on public schools. There are over 3,000 individual codes in the OCAS system. As the study states:

"A tradeoff exists between the number of codes in the system and its overall usability. Namely,

adding more fine-grained codes can improve transparency but each new code increases the

complexity of the system, raising training burdens and creating more opportunities for mistakes to be made. Conversely, reducing the number of codes can simplify reporting and improve consistency, but excessive consolidation may obscure meaningful differences among expenditures and make it more difficult to assess how resources are actually spent."

It doesn't help that the meaning of each code and how to interpret has, over time, moved from an exact science to a craft practiced by experienced school administration employees, to an art that requires both in-depth knowledge and a concerning amount of creativity to interpret, with even more concerning regional flares depending on who exactly reported the expense.

There are also, always, errors. One might be astounded to hear how common these coding errors are, until one considers perfectly coding a month's worth of school expenses, ranging from gas for buses, paper for an office printer, paper for the shared art room, fertilizer for the playground soccer field, maintenance on a broken window and any food items purchased for that month's school lunches, among a hundred other small expenses. And each has a different extremely long code.

And there is no real means of verification within the system, even for the school staff themselves.

"Truly determining whether a transaction was properly coded may require reviewing underlying documentation, including invoices, receipts, purchase orders, contracts, and payment records," the study states.

Hamlin and the OEQA staff who helped him with the report first and foremost suggest OSDE increase training and technical assistance related to OCAS reporting beyond what is already offered across the state, focusing more on OCAS as a holistic framework.

Though it is also clear from the other suggestions put forth that Hamlin does not believe OCAS currently works as a holistic framework instead of a book of rules.

The report also suggests revising the OCAS Advisory Committee focused on identifying reporting challenges, workable improvements, efficient operation of the system and a review of all the current codes to see where there are opportunities to eliminate unnecessary duplication and consolidate some codes.

"The committee should determine where greater detail is genuinely needed for accountability and where it is not. The committee should also revise vague or inconsistently interpreted codes by providing clearer definitions, practical examples, and guidance on when each code should be used," the report states.

The report also suggests a "one-in, one-out" rule for any new codes and that districts are not required to re-report information already held by SDE.

Section 2

Building the Whole Child

Investing in the Future: The Economic Benefits of Early Childhood Education

Sachi Gosal, Michigan Journal of Economics, May 2, 2025

Early childhood education (ECE) is an important factor in academic success and the wellbeing of individuals. ECE refers to structured care and education programs for children, from birth to age eight. These programs focus on building cognitive, social-emotional, and physical skills, such as literacy, problem-solving, and motor skills (American Public University, 2024). ECE encompasses formal education in public or private schools, but also informal learning such as home-based care or community groups. Examples include public preschools, Montessori schools, or Head Start programs. While ECE is widely acknowledged as the foundation for academic and social development, it has become increasingly recognized as an economic strategy for growth (American Public University, 2024). Investment in ECE may enhance workforce productivity, reduce income inequality and decrease public spending on the criminal justice system. Through fostering the early development of cognitive and social skills and offering cost-effective public education that generates long-term returns on government investment, early childhood education produces significant societal economic benefits. This article explores the economic benefits of ECE, compares cost effectiveness of different ECE models, and describes long-term economic benefits of publicly funded ECE programs.

Numerous studies have linked participation in ECE with better long-term outcomes, such as improved academic progress, higher earnings, and decreased involvement in the criminal justice system. Children who participate in ECE programs are more likely to graduate from high school and pursue higher education, compared to peers who do not participate (Barnett 2011). These educational milestones often translate into better employment opportunities and higher lifetime earnings, as high school graduates are more likely to be employed, pay taxes, and contribute positively to the economy overall (Carroll & Ekrut, 2009). Therefore, ECE is not just a means for individual success, but also economic growth as a society as more individuals join the workforce and contribute to public welfare. Another study is the The Perry Preschool Project, a 1960s study that tracked children from low-income families who were randomly assigned to preschool programs. The study determined that those who attended preschool had 17% higher high school graduation rates and were more likely to be employed compared to non participating peers. In adulthood, participants earned 25 to 40% more annually than peers who did not receive early education (Heckman et al., 2010). The study highlights the long-term impact of ECE, as important habits for success, such as communication and problem solving, are introduced in early education. Increased earning potential ECE has also been linked to reduced crime rates and lower dependency on social welfare programs, reducing long-term costly public spending. The Chicago Child-Parent Center study found that every dollar spent on early education yielded around $11 in benefits (Reynolds et al., 2011). These returns manifest through increased earnings, reduced crime, and lower public expenditures on social services. Therefore, early education not only benefits individual development, but also allows them to contribute to the economy and relieve burdens on social systems.

Despite its benefits, access to early learning environments is unequal across the United States due to variation in cost, availability, and quantity (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2023). Public education programs seem to be the most cost-effective for families and communities. Public education also allows children to mix with peers of diverse backgrounds, interests, and skills, which mimics many workplaces. In contrast, private and homeschooling options often require significant financial and time investments, limiting accessibility. Private education can offer specialized curricula or smaller class sizes, but can be costly, creating barriers for lower-income groups and fostering future inequality. Meanwhile homeschooling lacks the structured peer interaction that is critical for cognitive and social development.

Government funding of early childhood education yields considerable returns on investment. Nobel Laureate economist James Heckman estimated that every dollar invested in early childhood programs yields a return of $7 to $13 in economic benefits long term (Heckman, 2006). Moreover, ECE enhances cognitive and social skills, such as emotional regulation and logical reasoning, that are essential for productivity in the workforce. Therefore, investment in early development allows for the creation of a more skilled workforce, as individuals with these fundamental skill sets may be more adaptable and employable. A more skilled and productive workforce can increase long-term economic benefits in society. Government sponsored education can also stimulate local economies by creating jobs for faculty and staff. According to the Center for American Progress, expanding preschool access could create over 500,000 jobs across the country, and increase workforce participation among parents (Workman and Jessen-Howard, 2020). Following the Covid-19 pandemic, the need for strong early education programs is increasing. The pandemic disrupted early learning for millions of children, exacerbating gaps across education accessibility and halting youth development of critical skills. The disruption to ECE was noted by policymakers, and the federal government allocated around $40 billion in child care stabilization funding through the American Rescue Plan (Administration for Children and Families). The federal government also allotted pandemic relief aid to Head Start and the Child Care Development Fund (The Education Trust, 2021). Government commitment to ECE aligns with the evidence that early childhood education is a beneficial public investment.

While millions of children in the United State attend ECE programs, its societal economic benefits can be overlooked. ECE improves individual academic and employment outcomes while simultaneously reducing the financial strain on public systems. Various types of ECE can generate long-term returns on government investment and produce significant societal benefits by fostering the early establishment of cognitive and social skills. These skills are important for later education and employment, and can increase an individual's chances of graduating high school, finding a job, and contributing to the environment. Therefore, early education remains important to the economy as a cost-effective opportunity for long-term benefits across society.

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"It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken adults."

Frederick Douglass

Why Early Matters

Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University

Learn why a child's earliest years are so important for health and development, and find practical, actionable strategies to support children and caregivers in your community.

Science Snapshot: What We Know

When it comes to development, it's not just what happens that matters, but when. Beginning before birth, the exposures and experiences that children have early in life—when their developing biological systems are most sensitive to environmental influences—can have powerful and lasting effects on their development, with lifelong implications for their health and well-being.

Early foundations shape a child's future.

- Brains are built over time, from the bottom up, through an ongoing process that begins before birth. The connections that form early provide either a strong or weak foundation for the connections that form later, shaping all future learning, behavior, and health.
- Responsive exchanges between a young child and a caring adult—known as serve and return interactions—support the development of early language and social skills that serve as a foundation for more complex cognitive abilities that form later in life.
- Experiences and exposures during the earliest years affect the development of many interconnected biological systems—not only the brain, but also the immune, metabolic, and cardiovascular systems, with implications for lifelong health.

Timing matters.

- We are all sensitive and responsive to our environment. But timing matters: the sensitivity of developing biological systems to exposures and experiences is typically greatest in the prenatal period—when the brain, heart, lungs, and immune system are developing rapidly—and decreases over the course of childhood.
- That means that early experiences and exposures—everything from temperature to toxins to relationships—can have a powerful impact on children's health both now and well into adulthood.
- The good news is that, just as negative experiences and exposures are more likely to be harmful in early childhood, anything we do to protect children during that time is likely to have significant beneficial effects—in childhood and beyond.

Early childhood offers a critical window of opportunity.

- Many of the most prevalent, chronic, and costly diseases of adulthood—including diabetes, dementia, cancers, and depression—are rooted in early experiences and exposures, beginning during pregnancy.
- A child's biological systems adapt based on experiences in their environment. When children experience significant adversity, leading their stress response systems to activate at high levels for long periods of time, these systems can become set on permanent high alert. Over time, this can lead to greater risk for stress-associated diseases—such as cardiovascular disease, obesity, and mental health disorders—well into the adult years.
- Efforts to prevent many chronic diseases in adults can be more successful if we start during the prenatal period and early childhood. By creating safe, supportive developmental environments free of hazards and rich with opportunity, we can help ensure our children have what they need to thrive in childhood and beyond.

Solutions Snapshot: What We Can Do

Practical, actionable strategies already exist to help ensure our children have a healthy start, surrounded by supportive relationships, positive experiences, and developmental environments that support their health and well-being.

A new era of policy and program solutions must focus on pregnancy and the earliest years—and prioritize what's good for children across a wide range of policy sectors, while also addressing disparities across our communities. Policymakers and community leaders can take a variety of approaches, including:

- Support caregivers: Policies and programs that assist caregivers—such as expanding access to paid parental leave and financial assistance programs—can help reduce caregiver stress and promote stable relationships in the critical months after birth.
- Prioritize the places where people spend the most time during pregnancy and early childhood: For example, monitoring and improving indoor air quality and testing and filtering water in childcare facilities, schools, camps, and offices can reduce exposure to air pollution, lead, and other toxic contaminants during pregnancy and early childhood.
- Promote safe, stable housing: Policies and programs that boost housing availability and reduce evictions can strengthen housing stability for young children. Housing developers and policymakers can also prioritize locating high-quality, affordable childcare facilities within housing environments that support healthy development in pregnancy and beyond.
- Expand access to health care during pregnancy: Creative solutions like mobile maternal health units—particularly in rural areas—can help meet families where they are, reduce barriers to care, and ensure that prenatal care is available to everyone.

The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study: Understanding the Lasting Impact of Early Trauma

Linda Manaugh, Retired Chief Programs Officer, Potts Family Foundation

Introduction

The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study, pioneered by Dr. Vince Felitti and Dr. Rob Anda in the late1990s, is one of the most important public health studies in recent history. This landmark research has informed and changed how we understand the relationship between childhood adversity and long-term health outcomes. By systematically documenting the prevalence and effects of childhood trauma, the ACE Study has illuminated how early negative experiences can impact and shape our physical, emotional, and social well-being across the lifespan.

The Origins and Design of the ACE Study

The ACE Study began as a collaboration between the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Kaiser Permanente, a large healthcare organization in California. Dr. Felitti, a physician at Kaiser, and Dr. Anda, a CDC epidemiologist, sought to investigate why so many patients with chronic health issues had histories of failure in weight loss programs. Their curiosity led them to explore deeper, eventually uncovering strong links between childhood trauma and adult health problems.

Between 1995 and 1997, over 17,000 adult members of Kaiser Permanente's health plan, primarily middle-class women in a weight loss program, were surveyed about their childhood experiences and current health status. The survey focused on ten categories of adversity experienced before the age of 18, including various forms of abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction including physical, sexual and emotional abuse; physical and emotional neglect; domestic violence; parental divorce; and household mental illness, incarceration and substance use.

Key Findings of the ACE Study

The results were striking—finding that ACEs are common with nearly two-thirds of the participants reporting at least one adverse childhood experience, and more than one in five reporting three or more. ACEs were shown to be co-occurring and cumulative. As the number of ACEs increased, so did the risk of physical health and mental health problems. In other words, the more types of adversity a person experienced in childhood, the greater their risk for a wide range of problems, including:

- Chronic diseases such as heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and stroke
- Mental health disorders like depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders
- Risky behaviors, including smoking, alcohol and drug abuse, and unsafe sex
- Social and economic challenges, such as lower educational attainment and job instability
- Premature death

Having four or more ACEs were related to:

- Seven-fold increase in the risk of alcoholism
- 4.5-fold increase in risk of illegal drug use
- 90% increase in the risk of cancer
- 60% increase in risk of diabetes
- 2.2-fold increase in risk of heart disease
- 12.1% increase in risk for suicide
- 5.5% increase in committing intimate partner violence

On average, individuals with six or more ACEs die nearly 20 years earlier compared to those with no ACEs. And these findings have been replicated in hundreds of studies across the world over the past two decades, with an estimate of 60% of adults globally reporting at least one ACE.



The Impact of ACEs on Early Childhood Development

Adverse experiences in early childhood can have profound effects on brain development and the body's stress response systems. Chronic exposure to stress during critical periods of growth can disrupt neural circuits impairing memory, emotional regulation, and cognitive functioning. These disruptions can manifest as behavior problems, learning difficulties, and trouble forming secure attachments with caregivers or peers.

Children exposed to multiple ACEs are more likely to:

1. struggle in school, including being three times more likely to repeat a grade
2. frequent diagnoses of learning and behavioral disabilities
3. experience social isolation
4. exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress
5. twice as likely to be overweight

Early intervention and supportive relationships can buffer some of these effects, but without adequate support, the risk of long-term difficulties increases.

Long-Term Consequences in Adulthood

The ACE Study's most significant revelation was that the effects of childhood adversity extend far beyond childhood itself. Adults with higher ACE scores are at increased risk for chronic physical illnesses, mental health disorders, and premature mortality. The stress and trauma of early experiences can become biologically embedded, affecting immune function, hormone regulation, and even genetic expression—a phenomenon known as "toxic stress."

Furthermore, without intervention the cycle of adversity can perpetuate across generations (epigenetics), as adults with unresolved trauma may struggle with parenting, leading to further risk for their children. The ripple effect of ACEs thus has broad implications for public health, education, and social services.

What are Protective and Compensatory Practices (PACEs)

Numerous studies have shown that positive experiences during childhood set the foundation for adult mental health. Drs. Amanda Morris and Jennifer Hays-Grudo have identified ten specific protective and compensatory experiences (PACEs) that promote positive outcomes in the face of adversity, as well as overall healthy development. PACEs have been related to greater mental well-being and higher education levels and income. Like ACEs, PACEs are measured as experiences that occur prior to age 18.

The ten PACEs are categorized into two domains: supportive relationships and enriching resources. Supportive relationships include unconditional love from a caregiver; having a best friend; volunteering in the community; being part of a group; and having a mentor. Positive parenting, social support, and belongingness have been found to facilitate the development of children's empathy, self-regulation and social skills. Our second domain, enriching resources, include living in a safe home where needs are met; getting a quality education; having a hobby; being physically active; and having rules and routines. Both animal and human studies point to the importance of enriched environments for learning, managing stress, and avoiding risky behaviors.[1]

Protective experiences provide the basis for the PACEs heart model. Supportive and resources lead to healthy development.



Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings from Felitti and Anda's work have transformed approaches to healthcare, education, and social policy. Recognizing the pervasive impact of ACEs, many organizations now emphasize trauma-informed care, which seeks to understand and address the root causes of behavioral and health issues rather than simply treating symptoms. Early screening, prevention programs, and family support services are essential for breaking the cycle of adversity.

At the policy level, the ACE Study continues to inform legislation and funding for mental health services, child welfare initiatives, and community programs aimed at building resilience and supporting at-risk families.

Conclusion

The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study by Vincent Felitti and Rob Anda has reshaped our understanding of the profound, lifelong impact of early trauma. By documenting the links between childhood adversity and later health and social outcomes, their research has spurred a movement toward more compassionate, comprehensive approaches to health and well-being. As Dr. Bruce Perry says, "It's not what's wrong with you but what happened to you." Addressing ACEs is not just a matter of individual healing, but a public health imperative with the potential to improve lives for generations to come.

References

1. *Ratliff, Erin, Morris, Amanda Sheffield and Hays-Grudo, Jennifer. The Impact of Adverse and Protective Childhood Experiences. Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service. May 2020*

Building Strong Foundations: How Oklahoma Is Reimagining Early Childhood Support

Ann Rosales, Director of Elementary Teaching and Learning, Norman Public Schools

The earliest years of a child's life lay the foundation for everything that follows. Long before children enter kindergarten, they are developing language, social-emotional skills, executive functioning, and the confidence that will shape their educational journey. While high-quality early learning opportunities are essential, academic instruction alone is only one piece of the puzzle. Health care, developmental services, family engagement, and community support all play critical roles in ensuring children are ready to learn and thrive.

Recognizing this, Oklahoma is taking an important step toward transforming how families access early childhood services. Through House Bill 1979, signed into law in May 2026, the state is creating a more coordinated approach to early childhood by establishing an Early Childhood Governance Task Force. Rather than having multiple agencies operating independently, the goal is to bring together leaders from education, health care, child care, higher education, and community organizations to create a more seamless system that serves children and families. I believe this will be transformational for students across Oklahoma.
For many parents and caregivers, navigating the current system can be overwhelming. A family seeking developmental screenings, special education services, health care resources, or early learning opportunities may find themselves working with multiple agencies, each with its own forms, terminology, eligibility requirements, and procedures. While each organization is dedicated to helping children, the lack of coordination can unintentionally create barriers for the very families the system is designed to serve.

When parents and caregivers encounter confusing processes or are repeatedly referred from one agency to another, many become frustrated. Sometimes families simply don't know where to begin, and other times they stop pursuing services altogether because the process feels too difficult or time-consuming. These challenges can delay critical interventions during the years when they matter most.
The vision behind Oklahoma's new governance model is to simplify that experience. By bringing key agencies together under one coordinated structure, families can more easily identify the services they need without navigating disconnected systems. Better communication among agencies means information can flow more effectively, reducing duplication and helping ensure children receive support earlier.

This coordinated approach reflects an important truth about child development: children do not grow in isolated categories. Language development is connected to health and well-being. Social-emotional growth influences learning. Family stability impacts school readiness. Every aspect of a child's development is interconnected.

When we focus exclusively on academics, we miss the broader picture. School readiness is about far more than recognizing letters or counting numbers. Children need healthy physical development, strong communication skills, opportunities to build relationships, emotional regulation, and supportive family environments. They also need adults who know how to connect them with appropriate resources when challenges arise.

Families, regardless of their background or income, often need guidance as they begin raising young children. Even parents and caregivers who work in education or have extensive knowledge of child development may be unsure where to turn when a child needs specialized services or developmental support. Every child's needs are unique, and knowing which resource is the right fit can be difficult. The new statewide collaboration has the potential to make those connections faster and more efficiently. Instead of families spending valuable time searching for answers, agencies can work together to provide coordinated support that meets children where they are.

This effort is especially important in a state like Oklahoma, where communities have varying levels of access to services. Geographic location, transportation, workforce shortages, and funding differences can all affect whether families receive the support they need. Rural communities often face unique challenges in accessing specialists or early intervention programs, while other regions may have limited availability of high-quality early childhood services. Creating a coordinated statewide system will not eliminate every challenge overnight, but it creates an opportunity to identify gaps and distribute resources more equitably. When agencies share information and work toward common goals, they can better understand where services are needed most and how to reach families who have historically experienced barriers.

Oklahoma has already demonstrated its commitment to young learners through several successful initiatives. Programs such as Dolly Parton's Imagination Library have expanded access to books and promoted early literacy by placing age-appropriate books directly into children's homes. These types of initiatives reinforce the importance of reading from birth and help families establish strong literacy habits before children ever enter a classroom. Yet even successful programs can have uneven reach depending on funding, local implementation, and commu-

nity awareness. A more coordinated statewide strategy can strengthen these efforts by connecting families to available opportunities while ensuring resources are shared across regions more effectively.

Ultimately, supporting children means supporting families. Parents and caregivers are their children's first and most important teachers. When families have access to reliable information, quality health care, developmental screenings, early intervention services, and educational opportunities, children benefit. Empowering parents and caregivers with knowledge and support creates stronger learning environments both at home and at school.

Research consistently shows that investments made during early childhood produce long-term benefits. Children who receive appropriate support during their earliest years are more likely to enter school prepared to learn, demonstrate stronger academic performance, graduate from high school, and contribute positively to their communities as adults. Early identification of developmental needs can also reduce the need for more intensive interventions later in life.

The creation of Oklahoma's Early Childhood Governance Task Force represents more than an administrative change. It signals a recognition that children deserve systems designed around their needs—not around organizational structures. By fostering collaboration among education, health, child care, and community partners, Oklahoma is taking meaningful steps toward creating a system that is easier for families to navigate and more effective in serving young children.

Strong foundations are built long before the first day of kindergarten. They are built through healthy development, nurturing relationships, engaged families, accessible resources, and communities working together. When every child has access to these building blocks, we create opportunities not only for individual success but for stronger schools, healthier communities, and a brighter future for our entire state. As Oklahoma continues this important work, the focus remains clear: ensuring every child, regardless of where they live or their family's circumstances, has the opportunity to begin school ready to learn, grow, and succeed. By bringing systems together and placing families at the center of the conversation, we move closer to achieving that vision—one child, one family, and one community at a time.

Notes

This is a resource document for you to use.
Take notes, highlight, use as a text book.

Investing in Oklahoma's Future: Why Social-Emotional Learning Deserves Our Full Support

Summer Foster, Oklahoma Education Journal, October 27, 2025



Summer Foster

Oklahoma's future hinges on the well-being and success of its children. Unfortunately, a recent 50-state report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation ranked Oklahoma 46th nationally in child well-being, placing our state near the bottom in child health and well-being outcomes. This problem highlights a pressing need for proactive solutions to support child well-being. One promising solution is to offer comprehensive Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in our public schools.

Social-emotional development is not merely a "soft skill" that supports positive mental health. It can provide a crucial foundation for academic and life success. According to the 2017 Council of Distinguished Scientists, SEL was identified as essential for learning, positive development, and success in adulthood. Top U.S. companies are also currently reevaluating the skills that they want prospective employees to have, placing greater emphasis on social and emotional skills. Simply put, many important outcomes are connected to one's ability to focus, collaborate, exercise self-control, make responsible decisions, communicate effectively, and be resilient in the face of adversity. Evidence also indicates that social-emotional competencies are not innate but can be learned.

Effective implementation of school-based SEL programs has the potential to accelerate educational achievement in Oklahoma. In the short term, SEL programs can improve the mental well-being of students, create a more positive classroom climate, and enhance academic achievement. In one study, students who participated in SEL programs were shown to score 11 percentile points higher on achievement tests than their peers who did not. This positive association extends to teachers as well by making classrooms easier to manage. Over the long run, SEL skills are linked to increased civic engagement, greater career and financial stability, and reduced criminal behavior. In fact, a cost-benefit analysis has previously shown a strong return on investment from SEL programming: an average of $11 in long-term benefits for every $1 invested in social and emotional programming.

Despite their benefits, Oklahoma's schools face significant barriers to implementing SEL programs. The Oklahoma State Department of Education has historically relied on federal grants and targeted initiatives rather than dedicated state funding, which has created gaps in programmatic offerings across school districts in the state. Adding to this challenge, SEL is often conflated with Critical Race Theory, leading to misconceptions about what SEL attempts to do with students. However, SEL programs should not be political. Parents across the political spectrum report wanting their children to learn how to manage emotions, set goals, and navigate social situations. What's more, when described without jargon, public support for SEL programs soars.

It is time for Oklahoma to make a meaningful investment in the future by fully funding and mandating comprehensive SEL programs for Pre-K through 3rd grade, eventually expanding programs through 12th grade. This comprehensive approach should include evidence-based curricula integrated across the school day alongside robust teacher professional development. Additionally, we must move beyond isolated efforts and embrace a statewide approach that integrates SEL into the entire school day.

The evidence is strong: investing in SEL is investing in a brighter future for Oklahoma. It is an investment in academic success, mental well-being, and the long-term prosperity of our state. I urge our policymakers to champion legislation that fully funds and implements comprehensive SEL in the state's public schools. I also call on parents, educators, and communities to engage in conversations that highlight SEL's importance. Our children deserve nothing less.

Author Bio

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Nebraska Head Starts Use Vests With 'Talk Pedometers' To Boost Early Literacy

ZERO2EIGHT, July 13, 2026

On a mid-June morning in the small city of Norfolk, Nebraska, a group of 2- and 3-year-olds clumsily ran around a playroom wearing identical purple cloth vests. As the toddlers babbled to their teachers, a rectangular recording device hidden in a chest pocket captured every word as they asked to go to the bathroom, talked about their favorite book or explained their newest drawing.

The classroom at the Northeast Community Action Partnership Early Head Start was part of a five-week program that uses the recorders — often called talk pedometers — to gather data on teacher-child interactions and train their educators to guide them toward longer, more in-depth conversations. The program is offered by the national nonprofit Lena, or Language Environment Analysis, which uses the technology to research young children's language skills.

The Buffett Early Childhood Institute, an education research center at the University of Nebraska, partnered with seven rural and urban Head Start locations to use Lena technology this spring with more than 1,300 children. It was Nebraska's first statewide implementation, funded by a five-year, $1.3 million federal grant geared toward helping states create programming to improve child literacy skills.

Lena has existed as a research nonprofit for more than two decades, but its professional development program, Lena Grow, started about six years ago. Last year, Florida lawmakers allocated nearly $1 million to provide Lena Grow to more than 400 preschools. The program has been expanding across Indiana over the past two years with a $3.2 million grant. Tennessee currently uses the technology in more than 1,200 early childhood classrooms.

"It's such a huge opportunity to be able to utilize these grant funds because it sets a really wonderful foundation for [children] as they enter kindergarten," said Paula Thompson, a University of Nebraska-Kearney professor and one of the grant project directors. "It will hopefully have positive outcomes as we look toward that ultimate goal of increasing third grade proficiency."

The work follows decades of discussion over how preschoolers best learn language.

A 1995 study found a dramatic difference in the number of words heard by children, depending on their family's income — often referred to as the 30-million-word gap. More recent research has found that it's not so much the number of words children hear, but the quality of the language they are exposed to.

Researchers have found that talk and interaction between



Zayn Maxwell, 5, receives a recording device in a purple vest as part of the Lena Grow program at Dodge County Head Start in Fremont, Nebraska. (Rebecca Elder)

adults and children in their first few years of life often impacts future cognitive development and academic achievement. This engagement is measured in "conversational turns," or the back-and-forth exchange of words between children and adults.

"The term 'serve and return' is kind of a basic analogy for these conversational turn-taking events," Thompson said. "It's been a foundation in language and literacy for years, and we just continue to strive toward better understanding it."

Lena records and collects data about conversational turns through the device in each child's purple vest. Daycares, preschools and Head Start centers use the data and training to increase the number of conversational turns between adults and children.

Lena Grow was designed to be used by all children in a classroom, but it is especially helpful for kids who don't talk much or are at risk of language isolation — meaning they get fewer than five back-and-forth exchanges with an adult per hour. An analysis of 33,256 children using Lena Grow found that 13% experienced language isolation.

"The way to improve literacy is actually to invest in and support language development in these early years," said Alexandra Daro, director of applied research for the Buffett Institute. "The more back and forth you can get in a particular conversation, the better children are able to pick up on the language that you're using."

A child's use of conversational turns has been linked to early literacy skills, social development and IQ scores.

A June report shows that the 51 children who participated in Nebraska's initial Lena Grow program increased their conversational turns by 21% over the course of five weeks — from 33.5 to 40.6 per hour.

Children in center-based childcare average 15 hourly turns, but an optimal early talk environment is roughly 40, according to Lena. Youngsters who began Nebraska's Lena Grow program with fewer than 15 hourly conversational turns boosted their talk by 111%, from an average of 9.7 to 20.5.

During the professional development program, early childhood centers have the children wear their vests one day per week. The recorder collects the number of conversational turns per child, in whatever language they are speaking, while the teacher continues the day like normal.

Norfolk educator Cassie Niedig said the data brought attention to children the adults weren't talking to as much, such as Elvis, a 3-year-old who is nonverbal. It also showed that some toddlers were vocalizing words but not creating conversational turns with adults.

"I thought I was talking to Elvis a lot," she said. "I didn't realize how much more we talked to Marlo versus the other [children] — he's our best talker because he's the oldest. But even though he's talking a lot, it's not necessarily with conversational turns."

Niedig said the toddlers loved the vests when they were first introduced to them, but there have been struggles because the children are so young.

"We've had a couple of issues just because they want you to let them play, and they don't want to have to put them on. But otherwise, we've had a great time with it," she said. "We just let them talk, and I do not treat it any differently than a normal day other than trying to focus on whatever goal we are focusing on that week."

One student with sensory issues struggled wearing one at first, but got used to it within a couple of hours. Placing stickers on the front of the vests also helped the kids warm up to the idea of wearing them once a week.

At Dodge County Head Start in Fremont, Nebraska, the 5-year-olds in the Lena program were excited to wear their vests, said Brittany Brown, a Head Start education specialist. One boy said the bulky recorder on the front made him feel like Iron Man — the device reminded him of the glowing reactor in the center of the superhero's suit.

"They feel a little empowered, and they really like having it — there's no hesitancy to put the vest on," Brown said.

After a day of recording, the data is uploaded and analyzed. Then, a Lena coach — often a local staff member trained by the nonprofit — teaches the educators participating in the program ways to increase the number of turns.

"The teacher is able to see if there is a certain hour where there's a dip, and they're able to discuss with their coaches ways to increase those conversational turns throughout the day," said Rocy O'Keefe, the nonprofit's chief growth officer.

During the coaching sessions, educators choose strategies to implement in the classroom. For example, Lena recommends that while teachers talk, read or sing with a child, they should comment on what the student is doing, name things the child is interested in, wait for responses, imitate them or get down on the children's eye level so interactions are face-to-face.

"The coaches will work with teachers to set a goal based on the observations of the data — either a classroom average goal, or they are looking at individual children who might need some individualized attention," Daro said. "Then the teachers practice throughout the rest of the week."

Amy Bloomquist, coaching coordinator and area manager, was trained by Lena to be a coach for the Norfolk Head Start program. She said teachers have responded well to working on a specific topic each week to increase conversational turns. They also talk to families about the program after parents have given permission for their child to wear the recording device.

"Each week they're sending an informational flyer home with the families, sparking some conversation between the teachers and the families," she said. "They're also giving them some tips on how to increase conversational turns at home."

In Nebraska, 22 Head Start centers are eligible to participate in the program, and Thompson said the Buffett Institute hopes to work with as many as it can by the end of the five-year grant. Its main goals for the next few years are not only for Nebraska children to improve their conversational turns, but for Lena Grow to increase 4-year-olds' literacy scores on an assessment of early childhood development called Teaching Strategies Gold, or TS Gold. Lena Grow has been found to improve language and literacy scores on these assessments in other states, such as Wisconsin, Florida, Ohio and Washington, D.C.

"The dream goal is to also eventually be able to work with the school districts that these kids are entering into to look at improvement in TS Gold [scores] as they transition into kindergarten," Daro said. "So, big dreams, but that's what we're going for."

Disclosure: The Walton Family Foundation and Overdeck Family Foundation provide financial support to Lena and The 74.

The First Classroom: Strengthening Early Relationships, Literacy, and School Readiness through Reach Out and Read in Oklahoma

Lori Lake, Former Executive Director of Reach Out and Read Oklahoma

Though state leaders and educators are working to improve literacy outcomes and strengthen schools to ensure every child has the opportunity to succeed, one barrier remains consistent: Too many children start kindergarten without the foundational skills that support learning. By the time reading struggles, behavioral concerns, or school-readiness gaps become visible in the classroom, many of the factors that contribute to those challenges have been developing for years.

By age 3, approximately 80 percent of a child's brain has already developed. During those early years, children are building the language, communication, and social-emotional skills that help them learn, build bonds, and navigate the world around them.

What shapes that development most powerfully are the people children interact with every day. Every conversation, shared story, comforting moment, and back-and-forth exchange helps build the foundation for learning and connection. Researchers refer to this as Early Relational Health: the strong, responsive relationships that help children develop the confidence, resilience, and skills they need to thrive.

This is an opportunity Oklahoma can't afford to overlook. If we want to improve academic outcomes, we must pay greater attention to the relationships and experiences that shape learning from the very beginning of life.

Every day, parents and caregivers are helping their children learn through conversation, play, reading together, and shared experiences. One of the most effective approaches is encouraging parents and caregivers to share books, stories, and conversation with their children from birth, a simple practice that supports both early literacy and overall well-being.

When people think about literacy, they often think about learning letters, sounding out words, or reading independently. But for infants and young children, literacy begins with relationships. A book is much more than a story — it's an opportunity for a parent and child to talk, laugh, ask questions, learn new words, and spend time together.

Long before a child can read independently, they are learning from every story they hear and every interaction that surrounds it. A caregiver pointing to pictures, responding to a child's observations, or simply cuddling together with a favorite book helps lay the foundation for future learning.

The benefits extend far beyond literacy. Research shows that shared reading strengthens parent-child bonds, supports emotional development, and contributes to Positive Childhood Experiences that help children grow and thrive into adulthood. Studies have also found that positive parenting practices, including shared reading, can help buffer the effects of adversity, reinforcing the important role nurturing relationships play in healthy development.

These findings carry an important lesson: Literacy and school readiness are shaped long before children enter a classroom. When children arrive at school with strong language skills, positive relationships, and rich early learning experiences, they are better prepared to engage with teachers, build friendships, manage emotions, and participate in learning.

This is why supporting families during the first five years of life represents such a significant opportunity for Oklahoma, and one of the most effective ways to do that is through pediatric health care.

Health and education are deeply connected, and pediatric care plays an important role in supporting both. Children who are healthy are more likely to attend school consistently, participate actively in the classroom, and engage in learning. Regular well-child visits help identify developmental concerns, hearing or vision challenges, behavioral health needs, and other issues that can affect a child's ability to succeed in school if left unaddressed. By supporting healthy development from the earliest years, pediatric care contributes to stronger attendance, greater classroom engagement, and improved educational outcomes over time.

More than 90 percent of young children attend regular well-child visits before entering kindergarten, creating a unique opportunity to reach families during a critical period of development. Reach Out and Read builds on that opportunity by integrating books and literacy guidance into pediatric care.

During well-child visits, health care providers share age-appropriate books, model for parents how to engage with the book and their child at home, and talk with parents and caregivers about how reading, talking, singing, and playing together promote healthy development. These conversations help families understand that they already have what they need to make a difference in their child's life: their

time, their attention, and their connection.

This approach recognizes an important truth: Parents and caregivers are a child's first and most important teachers. In Oklahoma, Reach Out and Read partners with clinicians across the state to reach tens of thousands of children and families each year. By meeting families where they already are, in pediatric checkups, the program helps strengthen early relationships, promote literacy, and support learning.

And the success of programs like Reach Out and Read also highlights a broader point: Helping children reach their potential is not the responsibility of schools alone. Children's development is shaped by a network of support that includes families and loved ones, health care providers, early childhood educators, libraries, community organizations, and policymakers. When those systems work together, children benefit.

If one policy recommendation could be advanced for Oklahoma, it would be this: Prioritize sustainable investments in evidence-based programs that strengthen both early literacy and healthy early relationships, beginning at birth.

Too often, public policy focuses on addressing educational challenges after they become visible. While those interventions remain important, the greatest return on investment comes from supporting children and families during the earliest years, when brain development is most rapid and when small interventions can have lifelong impacts.

This includes expanding access to proven early childhood programs, strengthening partnerships between health care and education systems, supporting family engagement initiatives, and identifying funding mechanisms that allow evidence-based interventions to reach more children across Oklahoma.

Such investments don't simply improve literacy scores — they would strengthen academic outcomes and social-emotional development, improve classroom engagement, and help ensure that more children enter school prepared to thrive.

The future of Oklahoma's children will be shaped not only by what happens within school walls, but also by what happens in homes, pediatric exam rooms, childcare centers, and libraries.
The opportunity before us is clear: Invest in children and families early, when the impact can last a lifetime.

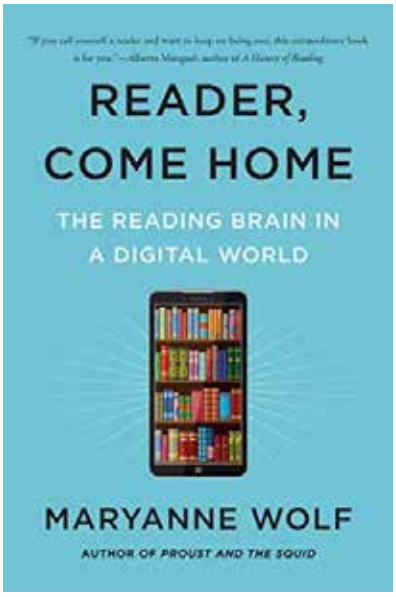
Reach Out and Read Oklahoma partners with more than 115 clinics across the state to annually serve more than 58,000 children and help families build trust, strengthen literacy and learning, and nurture emotional health from birth.

READER, COME HOME: The Reading Brain in a Digital World

Book by Maryanne Wolf (Summary by Craig Knutson, Academy Research Co-Chair)

I was encouraged by a long-time member of the Academy, Dr. Carl Rubenstein, to include the thoughts of Ms. Wolf in this year's Town Hall Discussion. Let me state up front: No summary can fully do justice to the work of a researcher of Ms. Wolf's acclaim or to the depth and significance of this book. At just over 200 pages, it is not a lengthy academic tome but is densely populated with down-to-earth examples to illuminate difficult ideas and concepts. With a strong background in literature, philosophy, and neuroscience, she presents her thoughts in nine LETTERS (chapters), opening each LETTER with Dear Reader, ...

Her initial premise is what we read, how we read, and why we read change how we think. The rapid introduction of technology into all facets of our lives – work, school, play, and home – can have an irreversible effect on how we consolidate information into what she calls "reservoirs of knowledge." She is particularly concerned with young reading brains, lamenting that more and more of your youth are not reading other than what is required and "often not even that: "tl; dr" (too long, didn't read)."



She spent over seven years of research trying to better understand how the brain had learned to read over it's six thousand year history. Today, our literacy based culture has begun a transformation into a digitally based culture, with little research being conducted on the formation of the digital reading brain.

She poses a number of questions for the "Dear Reader" to ponder, three of which I found most challenging to answer. Will the combination of reading on digital formats and daily immersion in a variety of digital experiences – from social media to virtual games – impede the formation of the slower cognitive processes such as critical thinking, personal reflection, imagination, and empathy that are all part of deep reading?

Will the mix of continuously stimulating distractions of children's attention and immediate access to multiple sources of information give young readers less incentive either to build their own storehouses of knowledge or to think critically for themselves? Finally, will the increasing reliance of our youth of the servers of knowledge prove the greatest threat to the young brain's building of its own foundation of knowledge, as well as the child's desire to think and imagine for him- or herself?

And yet, with questions like that to ponder, she clearly states that this book will offer "no binary solutions," and "do not think that I am against the digital revolution." It is better understanding the growing knowledge and IMPACT of different media on the reading brain as we encourage our children to read deeply.

Her Letter titles provide excellent insight into the content that would follow. *UNDER THE BIG TOP* (An Unusual view of the reading brain) delves into the science of reading and how it effects our brains by activating multiple areas of the brain. *DEEP READING* (Is it Endangered?) asks multiple questions, like, Will our quality of attention in reading – the basis of the quality of thought –change inexorably as our culture transitions away from print-based culture toward a digital one? *THE RAISING OF CHILDREN IN A DIGITAL AGE and FROM LAPS TO LAPTOPS IN THE FIRST FIVE YEARS* (Don't move too fast) reveals a cautionary future and wonders if this next generation, so adept at multi-tasking and quick access to multiple sources of knowledge, will fail to develop their own slower, more demanding deep reading processes, such as critical thinking and perspective-taking.

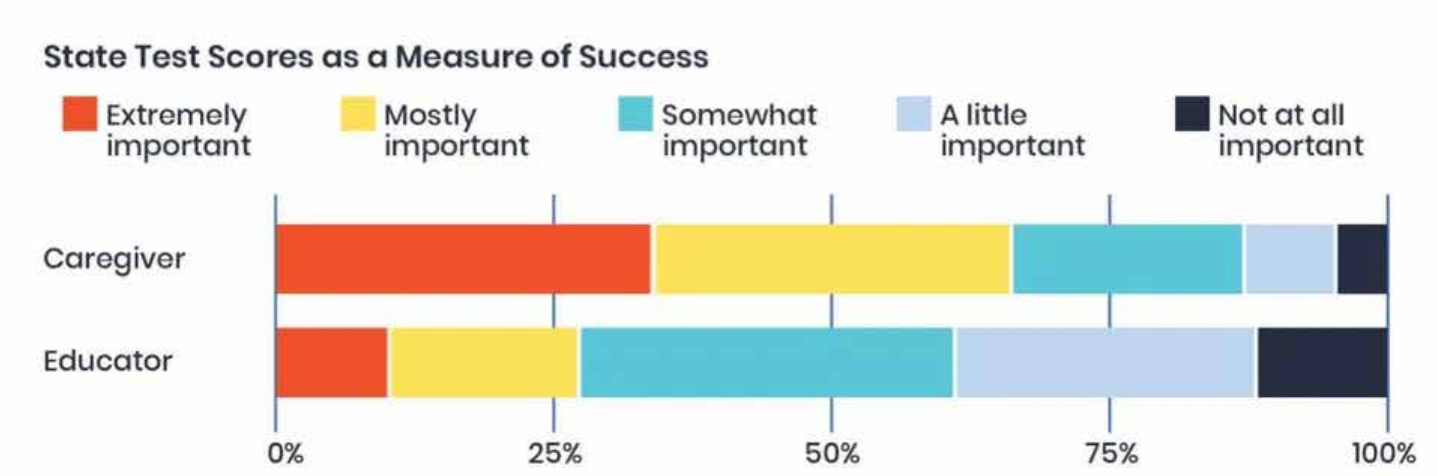
The last two Letter titles, *BUILDING A BIVARIATE BRAIN* and *READER, COME HOM*E seek to tie the previous research shared and to her thoughts on what a Good Society looks like and the similarity to how Good Readers approach life. She calls upon Aristotle to share his thoughts on a Good Society. It has three lives: the life of knowledge and productivity, the life of entertainment, and the life of contemplation.

It is the third life that concerns her the most. She calls upon her research and other experts to note that "digital media trains us to be high bandwidth consumers rather that meditative thinkers." Or posed a different way, "does the daily avalanche of information banish the space needed for actual wisdom?" She concludes that the contemplative dimension within us is not a given and requires intention and time to be sustained. Her concerns seemed to be well-grounded on both her research and that of other peers. She closes her last Letter to the Reader with this:

Festina Lente, dear and good reader. Come Home. Godspeed, Maryanne. I had to look up the phrase she used. According to Wikipedia (not AI), it is a classical Greek adage meaning "make haste slowly." The English translation is often stated as: "more haste, less speed." Given her research and admonitions in her book, a very appropriate way to sign off. I highly recommend the book to attendees and ALL parents of young children.

Beyond The Score: Why Growth Matters More Than Performance

Lisa Schade, MHR, Chief Executive Officer, Trinity School at Edgemere



Data reported by the National Center for Learning Disabilities reveal that many caregivers and educators question whether standardized test scores alone provide a complete picture of student success.
NCLD

One of the most common questions teachers hear from parents is: How do I know if my child is actually learning?

It's a fair question. Unfortunately, we've convinced ourselves that a single test can provide the answer.

For years, policymakers, educators, and parents have relied on standardized test scores to answer some of education's biggest questions: Is a student learning? Is a school effective? Is a child ready for what's next?

Yet the question we rarely ask is this: *What exactly are we measuring?*

A test score can tell us how a student performed on a specific assessment on a specific day. What it cannot tell us is how that student learns, what obstacles they have overcome, how much growth they have made, or what instruction they need next.

Somewhere along the way, we stopped using tests to inform learning and started designing learning around the tests. The consequences are particularly significant for students whose brains process information differently.

The National Center for Learning Disabilities reports that "breaking barriers to available support for people who may have undiagnosed and unrecognized learning needs is essential." In its 2022 review of emerging assessment models, the organization found that while states are exploring alternatives to traditional standardized testing, many new approaches still struggle to fully serve students with disabilities. Some provide more frequent feedback but lack meaningful accommodations. Others capture deeper learning but are difficult to implement consistently at scale.

Standardized assessments were designed to compare students against a normed population. They were never intended to tell the entire story of a child. However, they are often treated as measures of intelligence, readiness, and potential.

For students with dyslexia, ADHD, autism, executive functioning challenges, and other learning differences, the testing format itself can become part of the challenge. Timed assessments, lengthy testing sessions, high-pressure environments, and limited, retrofitted accommodation options can create barriers unrelated to the content being assessed.

For many students, success on an assessment has as much to do with navigating the testing experience as it does with demonstrating what they know.

Development and learning are dynamic, influenced by many factors, including the environment, teachers, and individual experiences. While standardized tests play a role in understanding our children, they cannot capture the multitude of skills that define the fluid nature of learning and the underlying potential of a neurodivergent learner. Far too often, standardized tests test the disability, not the depth of knowledge the neurodivergent student possesses. If we are truly going to break down barriers to education for this population, we must acknowledge this as a primary barrier.

Dr. Jeff Skowronek, Child Psychologist and Executive Director of Pepin Academies, a Yass Prize Finalist and one of the nation's largest charter school networks serving

neurodivergent learners, puts it this way: "To meaningfully assess neurodivergent students, we must stop forcing the idea of thinking outside the box. An inclusive educational system must learn how to make the box bigger. We know students are capable of much more than they can demonstrate on a standardized test, yet those measures often define "success" and even promotion to a new grade.

Anyone who has worked with students knows that learning is rarely as straightforward as a test score suggests. A student may need additional processing time, struggle with anxiety, or have difficulty sustaining attention and still possess remarkable insight, creativity, leadership, and problem-solving ability.

When schools focus primarily on benchmark scores, they risk overlooking many of the qualities that contribute to long-term success.

"I've watched students begin to define themselves by their test scores," says Traci Epperson, LPC, Trinity School's Head of Academic Support and Counseling. Over time, "below benchmark" stops feeling like data and starts feeling like identity. That shift can negatively affect a student's confidence, motivation, and willingness to take academic risks. She continues, "Our results indicate growth often tells a more meaningful story than a single score ever could.

Focusing on growth lets students celebrate the small successes that build confidence and self-efficacy, while helping teachers maintain a focus on incrementally building the necessary skills for academic success."

This approach gives every stakeholder information they can use immediately.

Leveraging formative assessments, classroom participation, and project-based demonstrations, teachers can identify gaps, adjust instruction, and celebrate growth that might otherwise go unnoticed. Students see evidence of progress instead of repeated failure. Families gain a clearer understanding of how learning is developing over time.

Testing matters – and it should mean something. Schools should measure outcomes and provide families with clear information about how students are progressing. But if assessment is going to improve learning, it must do more than rank students at a single point in time.

Assessing growth, adaptability, problem-solving, resilience, self-advocacy, and the ability to apply knowledge in meaningful ways across multiple tools and formats, with accommodations built in from the start, is a far better way to assess a student's true growth and capability.

A score can be useful. It can reveal trends, identify gaps, and inform instruction.

What it cannot do is tell the whole story of a child.

Every student is more complex than a number on a report. Our assessment systems should reflect that.

> ***"Education is what remains after one has forgotten what one has learned in school."***
>
> *Albert Einstein*

The Special Education Blueprint For The Future Of Learning

Lisa Schade, MHR, Chief Executive Officer, Trinity School at Edgemere

The practices that help neurodiverse students thrive may be the reforms education has been searching for all along, and AI may finally make them scalable.

For years, education leaders have searched for the next breakthrough. We've adopted new standards, purchased new technology, redesigned assessments, and launched countless initiatives intended to improve outcomes. Yet many of the challenges schools face today—student disengagement, widening achievement gaps, and the demand for more personalized learning—remain stubbornly persistent.

What if the answer isn't something new at all?

For decades, special education has been solving a problem the rest of education is only now beginning to confront: students do not learn in the same way, at the same pace, or through the same methods. The practices developed to support students with dyslexia, ADHD, autism, and other learning differences hold important lessons for every school seeking better outcomes.



The irony is that the education system was never intentionally designed around how most students learn. It was designed for efficiency. Age-based grade levels, standardized pacing, large-group instruction, and one-size-fits-all assessments emerged from an industrial-era model built to educate large numbers of students at scale. While that model succeeded in expanding access, it was never particularly effective at responding to the reality that human beings learn differently.

Today, roughly one in five students has a learning or attention difference. But anyone who has spent time in a classroom knows that learning variability extends far beyond formal diagnoses. Some students need more structure. Others thrive with movement and hands-on experiences. Some require additional time to process information, while others are ready to move ahead long before a lesson ends.

Neurodiversity simply acknowledges what teachers have always known: there is no such thing as a truly "typical" learner.

When schools serve students in the middle of a continuum, students on both ends often pay the price. Those who need additional support struggle to keep up. Those who need greater challenge or alternative pathways frequently disengage. The result is a system optimized for standardization rather than learning.

Long before personalized learning became a popular educational buzzword, special educators were building systems around individual student needs. Structured literacy, multisensory instruction, progress monitoring, differentiated pathways, and project-based learning were not innovative programs. They were practical responses to students who learned differently.

Orton-Gillingham methods and other structured literacy approaches have transformed literacy instruction for students with dyslexia. Multisensory mathematics practices improve conceptual understanding for students who struggle with traditional approaches. Frequent progress monitoring allows educators to adjust instruction based on growth rather than waiting for annual assessments to reveal a problem.

At Trinity School, students who once avoided reading have become confident classroom leaders after receiving targeted intervention. Their growth serves as a reminder that many learning challenges do not reflect a student's potential. More often, they reflect a mismatch between the learner and the instructional approach.

What many educators are now discovering is that these approaches don't simply work for students with diagnosed learning differences. They work for all students.

This idea is reflected in Universal Design for Learning, a framework built on a simple premise: when you design for learners at the edges, everyone benefits. The same instructional practices that make learning more accessible for neurodiverse students often create stronger outcomes for all learners.

In many ways, neurodiverse students highlight the gaps in traditional systems. Their challenges exposed limitations that existed throughout the system long before most educators recognized them. As educators worked to support these

learners, they developed instructional practices that may ultimately prove valuable for everyone.

The schools making the strongest gains today increasingly share a common characteristic: they are moving away from standardization and toward personalization. They are incorporating structured literacy. They are using multisensory approaches. They are monitoring student growth continuously rather than relying exclusively on periodic testing. Most importantly, they recognize that effective instruction is not about delivering the same experience to every student. It is about helping every student achieve the same high expectations through pathways that reflect how they learn best.

The challenge with personalization has always been scalability. Educators understand that students learn differently, but delivering individualized instruction across classrooms, schools, and districts requires significant time and resources. Even the most talented teacher can only personalize so much in a classroom of twenty-five students.

For the first time, educators may have a practical way to scale what special education has long understood.

Artificial intelligence has the potential to become one of the most significant catalysts for personalized learning in modern education—not because it replaces teachers, but because it amplifies their capacity.

AI can help identify learning gaps, adjust instructional materials, provide immediate feedback, generate differentiated resources, and support individualized pathways in ways that were previously unattainable at scale. As access to these tools expands, schools may be able to offer levels of personalization that were once available only through specialized intervention programs.

This is already happening. Companies such as Boddle are demonstrating how adaptive learning technology can support individualized learning pathways through game-based experiences that adapt to student performance in real time. Rather than replacing teachers, these tools extend their ability to personalize instruction and keep students engaged.

Edna Martinson, co-founder of Boddle, created a game-based adaptive learning platform with more than 10 million users, demonstrating how technology can make math and literacy more engaging and effective for learners across a wide range of abilities. “The future of learning isn’t one-size-fits-all. Boddle uses adaptive technology to meet students where they are, personalize educational content, and help them progress at their own pace.”
For the first time, the gap between what educators know students need and what schools can realistically provide may begin to narrow.

The implications extend far beyond students with diagnosed learning differences. The future of education is likely to be more tailored, more responsive, and more individualized. Students will move through content at different rates. Instruction will adapt more dynamically to strengths and challenges. Assessment will become more continuous and informative rather than episodic and punitive.

Ironically, this future may look remarkably familiar to educators who have spent years working with neurodiverse learners. Many of the practices education leaders are now seeking to scale through technology have existed in special education classrooms for decades.

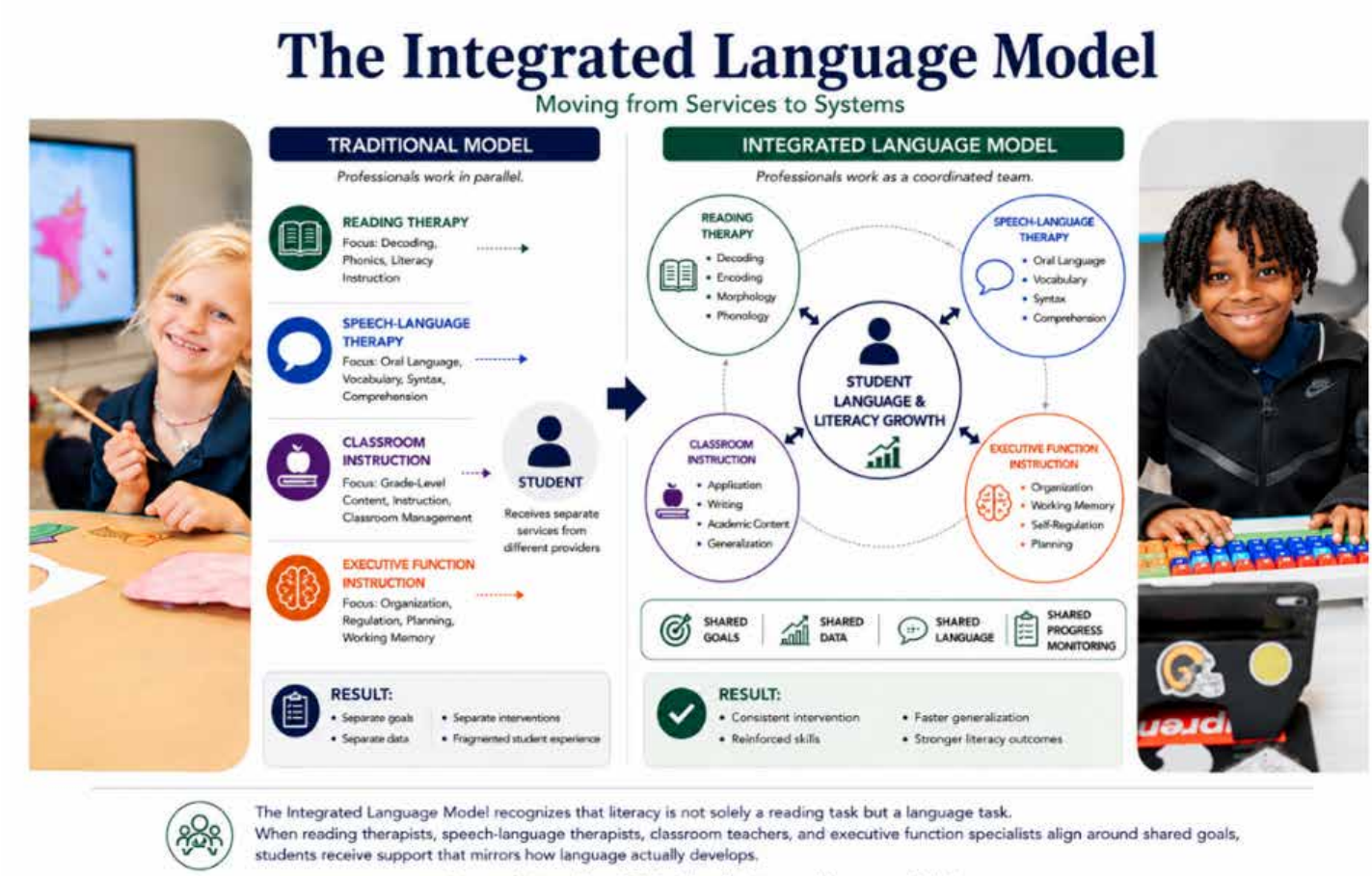
The conversation about the future of education often focuses on what comes next—new technologies, new instructional models, and new systems. Yet some of the most promising solutions are not new at all.

Special educators have spent decades refining approaches that recognize a simple reality: students learn differently, and effective instruction should reflect that reality. As AI makes individualized learning more achievable at scale, schools have an opportunity to bring those practices to far more students than ever before.

The future of education may be less about reinventing learning and more about scaling what already works.

The Literacy Solution Hiding In Plain Sight

Lisa Schade, MHR, Chief Executive Officer, Trinity School at Edgemere



Source: Adapted from Trinity School's Integrated Language Model

When a child struggles to read, schools typically respond with reading intervention. When a child struggles to communicate, they receive speech therapy.

Both approaches are valuable. Both are evidence-based. Yet one question is rarely asked: Why do we treat language as if it exists in separate categories?

Reading, speaking, listening, vocabulary, comprehension, and written expression are all connected. A weakness in one area often affects another. But in many schools, the professionals responsible for supporting those skills work independently from one another. The result is a system organized around services instead of students.

For children with dyslexia and other language-based learning differences, that separation can be costly.

The Overlooked Role of Oral Language in Reading Failure

Dyslexia affects approximately 20% of the population and is the most commonly occurring learning difference. It is often viewed primarily as a reading challenge, but reading does not happen in isolation. Successful literacy depends on a foundation of language skills that begins long before a child opens a book. Sound awareness, vocabulary, oral language, comprehension, and language structure all contribute to reading success.

When those systems break down, the impact rarely stays confined to reading alone.

A student may struggle to decode words while also having difficulty expressing ideas, understanding complex language, following directions, or organizing thoughts in writing. What appears to be an academic problem is often rooted in language development.

This reality raises an important question: If language is interconnected, shouldn't intervention be as well?

Decades of research suggest the answer is yes. Literacy experts have long demonstrated that skilled reading depends on both word recognition and language comprehension. In simple terms, students must be able to read words and understand language to become successful readers.

That may sound obvious, but many educational systems still separate those responsibilities. Reading specialists focus on decoding and literacy instruction. Speech-language pathologists focus on oral language and communication. Classroom teachers focus on grade-level content.

Each professional plays an important role, but too often they work in parallel rather than in partnership.

The students who benefit most are those who experience a coordinated approach.

Breaking Down Silos Between Speech Therapy and Literacy Intervention

Reading therapists and Certified Academic Language Therapists help students understand the structure of language through phonology, morphology, decoding, and encoding.

Speech-language pathologists bring expertise in vocabulary, expressive language, syntax, comprehension, and language processing. These are not competing disciplines. They are complementary pieces of the same puzzle.

When professionals align their work around shared goals, students receive more consistent support. Concepts taught during reading intervention can be reinforced through speech therapy. Language skills strengthened in therapy can improve reading comprehension and written expression. Learning becomes connected rather than compartmentalized.

This collaborative model mirrors what we see in healthcare, business, and other complex fields where specialists routinely work together to solve problems. Education should be no different.

The need for this approach is especially urgent as schools across the country work to address declining literacy rates. States have invested heavily in structured literacy initiatives, reading specialists, and evidence-based intervention programs. Those investments are important and necessary.

But literacy is fundamentally a language task.

If we want students to become stronger readers, we cannot focus solely on printed words. We must also strengthen the language systems that make reading possible in the first place.

The future of literacy intervention may not depend on discovering another program or purchasing another curriculum. It may depend on recognizing what decades of research have already shown: oral language and literacy are inseparable.

Children do not experience language in separate categories. They speak, listen, read, write, think, and communicate simultaneously.

Our intervention models should reflect that reality.

When speech-language pathologists, reading therapists, and classroom teachers work together, students receive support that mirrors how language actually develops. That is more than collaborative practice. It is a more complete response to the complexity of human language—and a better opportunity for students to reach their full potential.

How Curiosity Can Unlock Learning for Every Child

Jill Anderson, EdCast, Harvard Graduate School of Education, October 24, 2025

Curiosity is one of our most powerful, yet often overlooked, human drives, especially in education. Associate Professor Elizabeth Bonawitz explains that while there's no single definition of curiosity, it's best understood as an internal desire to resolve gaps in our knowledge or a wondering about how the world works. That innate drive begins in infancy, fueling our rapid early learning. But as children grow older, especially within structured school systems, that spark too often dims.

Through her research, Bonawitz explores how curiosity operates like mise en place for learning preparing the mind to absorb, connect, and retain new information. It activates attention, memory, and motivation, setting the stage for deeper understanding. Studies from her lab show that simple practices, like encouraging children to ask more questions, not only increase curiosity but also improve learning outcomes.

"Children who are more curious do better in math or reading scores in school. And that's particularly true for students that come from more under-resourced communities or students that might have other challenges associated with school," Bonawitz says. "So, curiosity is the great equalizer for education."

But curiosity is not the easiest thing to cultivate, especially in a classroom where barriers like test driven school structures and cultural differences tied to uncertainty. The good news is there are things educators and even parents can do to help foster that curiosity.

In this episode, the EdCast takes a deeper look at curiosity and explores ways to home in on what she considers the simple act of wonder.

Transcript

JILL ANDERSON: I'm Jill Anderson. This is the Harvard EdCast.

Elizabeth Bonawitz believes curiosity is one of the most powerful drivers of human learning. But to truly harness it, we need to better understand what curiosity is and how to nurture it in children and schools.

As a Harvard professor, she studies how curiosity shapes the way we explore, ask questions, and make sense of the world. It's one of the most essential ingredients of learning. Yet it's not always easy for educators to cultivate in classrooms where structure and freedom often pull in opposite directions.

I wanted to know more about what fuels curiosity and how teachers and even parents can create environments where wonder thrives. I started by asking Elizabeth, how do you define curiosity and learning?

ELIZABETH BONAWITZ: There's actually not a widely accepted definition of curiosity. So, some people define curiosity in terms of the behaviors that we see. So, when children ask questions or explore more, those are behaviors that reflect curiosity. That's challenging because those behaviors can also come about for other reasons, not motivated by internal curiosity. So maybe I'm exploring more because I think it's going to be fun or I'm going to get a reward. Or maybe I'm asking more questions because I've been taught that I'm supposed to ask questions, but not because I've got that internal motivation. So, another way to define curiosity is that sort of internal drive to resolve some gap in your knowledge.

So, I think about curiosity in terms of our wondering about the world, our ability to want to understand how things work and why they work the way they do. And so, when I talk about curiosity, I'm usually talking about what's called epistemic curiosity. So, the wondering about how things work. And that comes from this internal drive from our own mind to try to reconcile how the world works, why it's working the way it does.

JILL ANDERSON: I'm sure you get asked this all the time, but are some children naturally more curious than others, or is curiosity a skill that can be developed with the right support?

ELIZABETH BONAWITZ: That's a great and hard question. So, I think actually, we don't have great empirical answers to this. So, I think we don't know from the science entirely the right answer to that question. I think that we have intuitions that all children are born curious. That's part of what makes human learning as rich and rapid as it is. So, we learn a lot from very limited amounts of data very quickly, and that's partly driven by our own internal desire, even from infancy, to try to figure out how the world works. So that's a core mechanism that our mind already has set up. So, everyone has curiosity. Then there's a question about whether or not there's differences in individuals. I suspect that there are. And there's different ways in which you can experience curiosity. So, you could be someone who's always curious about things all the time. You could be somebody who when they're curious experiences it very intensely. So, I suddenly feel strongly curious as opposed to someone who feels weakly curious. Or you could be somebody who's triggered easily by things that might create a curiosity or information gap that makes you want to resolve something. So, there's a different kinds of ways that curiosity can come about. And you might have people whose profiles look a little different. Maybe I'm someone who's always metacognitively thinking, should I wonder

about this? And thus, I feel curiosity a lot. But when I feel curiosity, I'm not like overwhelmed by it. Or maybe I'm somebody. when I feel curiosity, I feel very strongly towards curiosity.

So, there's ways in which you could imagine temperamental differences. But we actually don't have good ways of measuring that empirically, which then adds to this question of, well, how do we know if we're increasing curiosity in an individual? Are there things that we can do that make children more curious or at least allow them to continue that innate, natural curiosity? There's data that's out there that suggests there's things that we can do that at least boost those curiosity behaviors. And maybe those are things that are also changing that sort of internal experience of curiosity, whether it's more often or it's felt more intensely. But we don't have great definitive answers to that question yet.

JILL ANDERSON: So how much do we know about how valuable something like curiosity is when it comes to learning?

ELIZABETH BONAWITZ: Curiosity is extremely valuable for learning. One of the things that I have argued in my own work is that when you're preparing a meal, sometimes you think about let's get the stage set. There's something called mise en place. You want to get all of your ingredients together ahead of time so that you're ready to cook. And one of the ways I think about curiosity is that it's that mise en place for learning. It's preparing the mind and the brain to be ready to get new information. So, your reward systems are starting to fire up, your memory systems are starting to fire up, and you're ready to be attentive and to pay attention to something.

So that's helping you when you get information figure out how to coordinate it with other memories, with other information you already have, how to feel rewarded from that information, and then helping you encode that information. So, curiosity is the physiological state that helps support learning right in that moment.

We know from other kinds of empirical studies that curiosity also relates to school outcomes. And so, children who are more curious do better in math or reading scores in school. And that's particularly true for students that come from more under-resourced communities or students that might have other challenges associated with school. So curiosity is the great equalizer for education.

So kids coming in from lower resourced resource backgrounds, if they're more curious, they're more likely to have higher math and reading scores in education. So that's another sort of link at a broad level between curiosity and learning and education, and then also at the specific mind level, we think that there are these links between that feeling of curiosity and learning.

JILL ANDERSON: It feels like curiosity is a real game changer for kids and for education. But figuring out how do we foster curiosity in all kids might be a challenge.

ELIZABETH BONAWITZ: It's a challenge for three reasons. One reason why it's a challenge is because we're still trying to figure out how to have good measures of curiosity. The second reason why it's a challenge to figure out how to foster curiosity is because I think that the way our school systems are set up are sometimes not always conducive to creating opportunities for children to explore their own interests and to ask questions that are things that we know about curiosity.

And a third reason why it's challenging is I think that more and more in our society, and particularly in the United States, we're not celebrating skills that are associated with curiosity, for example, intellectual humility, so the idea that it's OK to not know something. It's OK to not have an answer to something.

And in fact, we want to celebrate those moments where we're sort of uncertain, where we're like, huh, I don't know how that works. If we don't recognize that in ourselves and we don't celebrate those opportunities, then we're not modeling it for children as well.

And so that's another thing that I think is really important for children to see early in development but that make it challenging to figure out how are we going to foster this. We've got our own home environments and our society and cultural expectations that are working against curiosity. We've got the structure of the school day that's working against it. And then from a practical level, it's just challenging as researchers to study it, measure it.

JILL ANDERSON: I feel like young kids, in particular, especially in the early elementary years, they seem so curious. You ask them if they have a question. They always have questions. But then as you see kids going through the school system, it almost feels like that starts to shut down in some ways and kids become disengaged. I'm wondering, how do you see curiosity as a piece of the puzzle in learning?

ELIZABETH BONAWITZ: That's a great question. So, it's definitely true. Anyone who's a parent out there has the experience of their three, four, five-year-old insatiably, but why? But why? So, the constant questions that are coming, and it's so delightful to watch those children that are so excited.

And as the children start getting older, you don't see as many opportunities for kids to be but why, but why, especially in school. So, there are studies that suggest that children show less and less interest and curiosity towards school. By the time they're fourth or fifth grade, that curiosity, as measured in school settings, has really dropped off.

Now there's a question about what they're curious about.

So, I suspect, for example, if you asked an 11 or 12-year-old if they're curious about who their friend likes best or some other kind of social interaction, those kids are really curious about that. So, it depends on what you're measuring, whether you're measuring curiosity about school content or curiosity, say, about social.

I think that this idea that blanketly curiosity is just diminishing in childhood is something that we have to be careful about because it's not clear that all kinds of curiosity are diminishing. Nonetheless, we probably really care about making sure that children maintain a love of learning and a love of learning the kind of content that's happening in schools.

The one thing we found in our own lab is that you can actually promote curiosity and promote learning through relatively simple interventions. So, we studied preschool and kindergarten children, and we actually had two different groups of children. So, one group of children, we gave them science content. We met one on one with children over the course of two weeks, 10 times each child. And we gave them lots of science content that they learned about animals, and camouflage, and different kinds of things that were age appropriate. And one group of children we told to ask as many questions as they wanted as we were teaching them about this content. Go ahead, ask questions. You're doing a great job asking questions, giving them positive feedback. A different group of children, we told them to listen carefully, to pay close attention. Oh, you're doing a really good job paying close attention. You're listening really carefully. That's great. And at the end of those two weeks, we measured children's learning of the material, and we also measured their curiosity about new science content. So, we gave them a choice of watching a video about a tiger or a dolphin, whatever they are most excited about. And then we said, look, you can either watch this video about a tiger, or we'll give you three stickers. And we said, do the children want a prize, or do they want to watch the video? And if they said they wanted to watch the video, we upped the ante. We said, what if it was four stickers. What if it was five stickers?

So, we basically got a measure of how much they valued this new science content. So that's a measure of curiosity. How much are they willing to pay to learn something new? And what we found is that for the children who practice asking lots of questions over the course of those two weeks, those children, they're more willing to pay, give more stickers to learn new science information than children who were told to pay close attention. And those children who were encouraged to ask more questions also learned more. They learned more of the content. Effect was particularly strong for children who initially tested with lower verbal readiness scores, lower attentional scores, and so children who had these markers that might otherwise put them at risk for succeeding in school, that curiosity training — the question asking training really had a profound impact on those kids.

So, it shows us both that there's a link between curiosity and learning, that curiosity is supporting learning, but also that link is really important, and particularly might be a great equalizer for students who are coming in from maybe under-resourced backgrounds or backgrounds where they're not as otherwise prepared for school. So that felt like a great initial study to suggest this really simple thing we can do, encourage children to ask more questions, can make them more curious, can help them learn more. And in particularly, it works really well for students that otherwise might have lower school readiness scores.

JILL ANDERSON: Can you tell me some simple strategies parents and teachers can use to just nurture curiosity in kids?

ELIZABETH BONAWITZ: Oh, that's a great question. So, from that study, one of the simple strategies, I think, is allowing children to ask questions and getting them to think about their own uncertainty.

So, asking questions is good, partly because children are recognizing that they don't know something. And that's very important to then boost learning and further curiosity. It's training what we'd call metacognition, so being able to reason about your own reasoning.

But also, it's just demonstrating the importance of following your own interests and the kinds of rewards that you get from wondering. Like when you get an answer to a question, that feels really good. And so that's a great reinforcement. So, getting children to ask questions is really important.

As parents and educators, modeling curiosity is also really important, showing kids that it's OK to not know, that it's OK to ask questions, and that you yourself have questions all the time. And it's a great opportunity to learn something when you're not sure about something.

So, when children see that is a culturally acceptable thing and not only acceptable but something that has its own reward associated with it, like this opportunity to learned something new, that can be another really great way to encourage curiosity in early childhood.

A third thing that we can do as parents and educators is ask our own questions to children. One kind of research that I've done in my lab is looking at different kinds of teaching styles in the ways in which we interact with children and how that supports their learning and curiosity. So sometimes we can just tell children something. We can say, A causes B, but another thing we can do is we can ask what's called a pedagogical question. So, we ask a question to the child where we are knowledgeable, and we're trying to teach or help them learn.

And so, a pedagogical question might be, why do you think A causes B, or how does A cause B? And now you're

turning the learning back on the child to some extent. It's allowing them to explore and think through a solution in their own mind first. And again, it's paired with some direct instruction. So, giving them some content or some structure is also important. But that we have seen in the lab as well is something that promotes children's learning and curiosity.

So those three tactics, I think, using pedagogical questions as a teacher, asking questions to see the child, modeling your own curiosity and wonder about things, and also encouraging children to ask their own questions are three things that not only bolster curiosity but support learning.

JILL ANDERSON: What about that kid who is quiet, maybe doesn't ask questions? What do we do there?

ELIZABETH BONAWITZ: Yes, there's lots of reasons why children might be quiet or might not ask questions. Some children haven't learned yet that it's OK. They might come from a background where they're encouraged not to ask questions.

So, if you're a teacher see that quiet child, it may be that they're curious, that the gears are turning in their head, but they're not sure that they're allowed to. So, creating an environment where it's clear that it's permissible and rewardable to ask questions is something that I think is an opportunity.

Sometimes children don't ask questions also because they are worried about being judged for not knowing an answer. So, for example, in our own lab, we're looking at the possibility of using tools like AI interfaces for children to ask questions, as opposed to asking questions to a known human because you might be embarrassed to show that you don't have knowledge about something. If you're asking a question, maybe I'm showing, oh, I should know this concept, but I don't.

Now, ideally, we have a society or a world where we know that it's OK to be uncertain. It's OK to share that we don't have knowledge. But until that point, there are other kinds of tools where children might be more likely or willing to ask questions where they don't think they're going to be judged for it, where they think that there's maybe a computer that's providing some information. So that's something else that might encourage that quiet child who might actually be mulling and thinking about things but just restrained for potentially other reasons.

JILL ANDERSON: You mentioned earlier a little bit about this idea that there are things kids may naturally be interested in, and that obviously will vary depending on the kid. But a lot of what happens in education is there are certain things that they need to learn, and maybe they're not interested in them. So, I'm wondering if there's a way to transfer a little bit of that curiosity of interest to an area where maybe the interest isn't there.

ELIZABETH BONAWITZ: Yeah, that's a good question. It's a little farther outside my expertise, but I'm aware of the fact that there's different kinds of educational practice, like offering more choice to individuals where you're still doing an assignment, but you get to choose the topic that you're writing about or the kinds of questions that you're asking. Even when you have specific content that you're trying toto a child, there's ways to make it relevant to them. And one of the ways to engage the child is to help them recognize how their own beliefs might not be fully explaining the data. So, we're naturally motivated by our surprise, something that we didn't expect. And we're naturally motivated to fill or close an information gap.

So, if we see that there's something that we don't quite understand, there's actually an instinct that we have that we want to resolve that, that [INAUDIBLE] a piece of curiosity. So, I think teachers recognizing how to bring out that surprise or that information gap for a learner is a way to naturally pique their interest. Even when you're in a topic area that's not necessarily something that they naturally would gravitate toward.

One way, again, to do that is by asking questions that help the child reflect on, oh wait, I didn't know that right. Or how does that work? And so, when you create that scaffolding like, hey, there's this piece of information you might not already know, that starts to bring out the natural tendency to be interested in it.

But certainly, there's a balance between creating opportunities for children to be more self-directed and to have more choice in their learning and discovery. And when you can't do that as a teacher, you have content you have to get across, creating opportunities for the student to recognize why this information is so interesting or relevant to them, such as creating this opportunity for surprise or uncertainty because there's new knowledge that the child suddenly realizes through the question or through the prompt that they didn't have before.

JILL ANDERSON: I'm thinking about a classroom where children might be discouraged from asking too many questions. What changes could schools make to create a culture where question asking is central to learning?

ELIZABETH BONAWITZ: It's such a hard problem, and it's a hard problem because it's top down. We have policies in the United States, for example, where we're evaluating schools based on standardized test scores. Whether or not they get tenure or can maintain their career depend on how the students in their classrooms are performing on those tests. And this leads to a culture where teachers feel like they have to teach to the test. I have to give you this content. You have to memorize this fact in time for this whatever, MCAT next week. And I have limited time in the day to do that.

Part of the challenge is recognizing that to create effective

change in our educational system requires some top-down change, figuring out new ways to think about assessments. We do need assessments in schools, but ways to create assessments that don't then create this constraint in the classroom, which now the teacher is considering how to teach for the assessment as opposed to teach for the content. And that is an age-old problem in education.

And of course, there's also just the recognition that there's a balance, that creating opportunities — circle times at the beginning of class where this is our question period where we can sit it a circle, and we'll all ask lots of questions. And after this, we'll have our 20-minute reading period. Those are ways that you can structure a day and retain some opportunity for modeling and encouraging that curiosity behaviors, while still meeting the current structure of the school day or requirements that are coming from policy-level decisions. So that's a balance that I think is going to be a longer challenge for our culture to adopt.

JILL ANDERSON: I know I can only imagine with the expertise that you have you sometimes probably see things happening in schools that are just like, 'Oh wait, that is going to do the exact opposite of what we want.' So, it must be challenging to see.

ELIZABETH BONAWITZ: I will say — I mean, one of the things that I think is common is a lot of teachers, I think, underestimate the knowledge and skills that children have. So instead of teaching children about mechanism or abstract theory about why things work, you're just supposed to memorize this fact because they have a misconception that younger children especially can't hold abstract causal representations of the world. We know from years and years of psychology that that's not true. Even infants have some abstract representations of the world. Three and four-year-olds are forming intuitive theories about how the world works, and they're fascinated. They want to understand and explain and explore. They want to build that knowledge of how things work.

And so I think helping teachers realize that it's a misconception that you have to do really concrete things, but, in fact, you can talk at the abstract level is something that can both boost the wonder, boost their curiosity, and also boost their broader knowledge of how things work, which then help them explain and do well on tests and explore things.

So, I think one additional amendment that I would make is making sure that educators are not underestimating the abilities of very young children in the classroom in terms of what they're capable of understanding and discovering.

JILL ANDERSON: A lot of folks are thinking about the role of technology, AI, ChatGPT, and how can we use that to support or undermine curiosity in students?

ELIZABETH BONAWITZ: There's, I think, a lot of caveats. When we're talking about the large language models like ChatGPT [INAUDIBLE] generative texts, first of all, I think that there's moral and ethical considerations we should be engaging with more as educators. So, these have a tremendous toll on the environment in terms of the amount of power draw that they take. They're trained on data that it's not clear if its copyright protected or whether that data [INAUDIBLE] permissible to train these models.

And also, the ethical ways in which workers who work on those models are treated is in question. So, I think it's important first for educators to recognize that there's many ethical considerations about whether or not this trade-off is worthwhile for them.

That being said, assuming that we are working toward a world in which these tools are more and more adopted, for better or for worse, I think that there's a recognition and an understanding that we don't want children offloading their thinking onto machines, that learning how to plan, learning how to critically evaluate an argument, learning how to brainstorm yourself, generate your own ideas, pulling from memory, those are all things that aren't just needed in one moment. Those are muscles. Those are skills that need to be exercised and developed. So, when we offload those aspects of thinking onto machines, we're really damaging children's broader skills in critical thinking, in planning, in curiosity boosting activities that allow them to recognize their own uncertainty about something.

When you sit and you think about something and you realize, wait, I don't know how this works, as opposed to you just ask the question quickly to a computer, if you don't have that moment to reflect on that, you're missing that opportunity to understand your own limitations. Those are all really important skills that we want to develop in our next generation of workers because we don't know what jobs are going to be existing in 20 years.

So, what we do know is we need to build a generation of learners who are flexible, adaptive, and curious and creative in the way that they solve problems. And so, when you offload all the work of developing those skills onto machines, you're going to end up with a workforce in 15 or 20 years that doesn't know how to think creatively or flexibly.

The second problem is that those machines don't have understanding. They're just fancy photocopiers. They're just generating language from other texts, but they don't really understand how things work. There's no knowledge there that's built on the kinds of causal knowledge that humans have. And so as a result, if you don't have those critical thinking skills, you don't know how to assess whether or not these machines are generating garbage for you or not. It gives you a sentence that says, oh, A causes B, and as a learner if you don't know how to think critically, you say, oh, I'll just take that for fact, even though it's just words that got predicted one after the next and has no grounding in reality.

There's a lot of concerns about using these tools in that respect, for writing essays, for generating ideas, for working through how to solve a problem. All of those are critical, foundational skills in education that we want our children practicing. That's a big set of concern. I did mention that there could be benefits. So, one benefit is that if children are in a setting where they don't feel comfortable asking questions for whatever reason, it could be possible that you're more comfortable asking a clarification question like, wait, what does that concept mean? When I'm asked, what does curiosity mean, I can ask the machine, what is curiosity? I can get feedback. Now explain it to me more simply. I still don't understand. Make it even dumber. I really don't understand. And so, you can have this sort of conversation with the large language generative models that give you feedback in a way that you don't feel judged, and you don't feel embarrassed that you don't have that knowledge.

So that can be a benefit because now you have a better conceptual understanding. If you're working with a teacher or an aide and they say, OK, now I've explained it to you, did you get it, the instinct is to be like, yeah, sure. You don't want to demonstrate that maybe you didn't actually get it yet, but it's OK when you're interacting. So, figuring out how we can create environments where students feel comfortable continuing to say, wait, no, I still don't get it, I still don't get it, that's going to be really important. And until then, until we can create those settings, there could be uses for these kinds of tools where learners feel more comfortable interacting and asking questions. Of course, they might be getting the wrong answers, and they won't have any way to know. So, these are the trade-offs, even in the positive sense, that I think we have to be really careful about.

JILL ANDERSON: What other factors related to curiosity can support learning in schools and at home?

ELIZABETH BONAWITZ: So, I think one of the most important factors is joy of learning and having fun and creating playful, safe environments. One of the things we know from the literature in education and psychology is that play supports learning, but it supports learning for lots of reasons. It supports learning because children are naturally engaged, because it's fun. It also because they feel safe. They feel comfortable in an environment where they can be playful, to demonstrate their own uncertainty or ask questions. And so, when I talk about the joy of discovery, when we model our own uncertainty, that can be a playful experience for a child and so creating opportunities in classrooms and in homes where children are still engaging in play. Even recess is critical for learning and development. Children learn so much on the playground about how to interact with their peers. That social-emotional development is a critical piece of learning. And so that really goes hand in hand with curiosity and hand in hand with the critical, broader skills that are important for building lifelong lovers of learning.

JILL ANDERSON: I really love this because oftentimes in education or even at home, as parents, we overcomplicate things. And there's something that seems so wonderfully simple about curiosity and almost like we just forget about it.

ELIZABETH BONAWITZ: The opportunities to just take a beat when my child says something like, oh, I was wondering about this. And as a parent, my instinct is like, oh, here's the answer, or here's what I want to tell you, as opposed to creating that, well, why do you think? What do you think about that? Of course, you want to give answers as well as a parent but being able to model back that question and being able to just take a beat and realize like, there's a simple answer here. It's to let your child think more. It's to let your child engage with this, to raise that uncertainty. It's a lovely thing that sometimes we lose touch with as parents and as educators that can be really powerful.

JILL ANDERSON: I know it's so simple, and I'm guilty of doing that myself, where I just forget to ask them. But I'll try to do that today. All right, Elizabeth, thank you so much.

ELIZABETH BONAWITZ: Thank you so much for having me and for your interest today.

JILL ANDERSON: Elizabeth Bonawitz is an associate professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. I'm Jill Anderson. This is the Harvard EdCast, produced by the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Thanks for listening.

Oklahoma program connects hundreds of schools with local agriculture products

Craig Harris, Oklahoma Voice, January 20, 2026

Several hundred Oklahoma schools have signed on to participate in a new state program that aims to put fresh meat, fruits and vegetables on students' lunch trays.

The Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry's Local Food for Schools Program, which launched last year, connects local agricultural producers and farms with school cafeterias.

Brady Womack, rural economic development coordinator for the Department of Agriculture and approver for the program, said one of the program's goals is educating students about the culinary "farm-to-table or farm-to-school" movement, which emphasizes the importance of using locally sourced ingredients and supporting local economies.

Oklahoma's program is modeled after a larger one managed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which the state participated in from 2022 through 2025.

Oklahoma's Legislature allocated $3.2 million for the program, which allows approved schools to use state funding to purchase minimally processed foods such as fruits, vegetables, eggs, meat, dairy products, and nuts.

Minimally processed refers to foods that haven't been altered in a way that significantly changes the fundamental properties, Womack said. He said his agency works directly with its Food Safety Division to choose which farmers and ranchers are approved and to ensure they have completed all requirements to be able to sell food to schools or the public, Womack said.

"The Food Safety makes sure they have all their verifications or classes taken to be able to sell food to schools or the public," Womack said.

The program allows schools to request a maximum of $25,000 per month in increments of $5,000, with a limit of $100,000 per fiscal year. After the initial allocation, schools can then only apply once monthly.

Meriruth Sellers, director of market development for the state Department of Agriculture, said schools can choose which farms or ranches to purchase from as long as they follow the program's requirements.

"Many schools are able to buy from nearby farms, while others may have to travel farther," she said.

The program reimburses schools for purchases of local food so it only saves them the exact dollar that they purchased, Sellers said.
"This program is not intended to cover entire food costs … it is intended to help schools build relationships with local farmers by offsetting the cost of food," she said.

To meet higher consumer demand resulting from utilization of the new program, some producers have had to adjust their production rate but most have been able to maintain their normal daily operations, according to the American Farmers and Rancher's Cooperative.

Katie Whitfield, a field representative and coordinator with the Oklahoma Certified Beef Association, said that the program has a significant positive impact on the Oklahoma farmers and ranchers who participate.

"It provides them with stable, consistent buyers who purchase substantial quantities of their products, helping to create financial security while also allowing them to support their local schools and communities," she said.

Whitfield said the biggest challenge is logistics — getting the product to the schools efficiently. Some districts require large quantities of beef, which can pose transportation or delivery challenges, but these are manageable as the program continues to grow, and infrastructure improves."

"Programs like this shorten the supply chain, making the food system more resilient, transparent, and sustainable," Whitfield said. "They keep food dollars circulating within the state, support local economies, and reduce dependence on out-of-state suppliers—all while giving students access to fresh, nutritious, locally produced food."

She said her organization views Oklahoma's Food for Schools Program as becoming an essential part of the state's food supply chain.

"As more schools participate and more producers get involved, we anticipate expanded product offerings, stronger local supply networks, and deeper partnerships between agriculture and education," Whitfield said. "Ultimately, the goal is for locally sourced food to become the norm in Oklahoma school cafeterias."

Editor's note: This story was produced through a reporting partnership between Oklahoma Voice and the University of Central Oklahoma's journalism program.

St. Benedict's Prep backpacking experiment that takes kids from city to forest going strong after 50 years

Jessica Miano, Jersey Catholic, May 1, 2023

It was an experimental idea to give freshmen a hands-on learning experience in the 1970s — send students out on the Appalachian Trail for four days. The Trail, a Benedictine backpacking tradition established in 1973 at St. Benedict's Preparatory School in Newark, is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year and still going strong.

Students spend a full year preparing for this rite of passage, which tests their physical, mental, and spiritual endurance with a four-day, 55-mile self-led hike through the Appalachian wilderness that begins at High Point State Park and concludes at the Delaware Water Gap in northwest New Jersey.

This year, the annual trip will begin on May 20.

It all began in 1973 with two teachers and a group of 12 boys, Headmaster Father Edwin Leahy, O.S.B. told Jersey Catholic.

The school, located at 520 High Street, was closed during the 1972-73 school year after enrollment had plummeted from 800 to just 46 students in seven years.

In 1973, the school reopened, with a brand-new vision and promise to take a less expensive and more flexible approach to education. Quoted by the New York Times in a 1973 interview, Father Edwin said that the new school would be "a small, interracial school that will seek to face what we have come to recognize as some of the educational problems of our time… the new school, will, hopefully, prepare those students for college who want to continue their education. But if some decide to become carpenters or plumbers, we hope to provide them with a valuable four-year education."

Inspired by American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer John Dewey and his philosophy on experiential education, which promotes the idea that learning through experiences is an important foundation in a formal educational setting, the monks at the school sought to create opportunities for boys to engage in technical internships, community service, research, and other experiential learning opportunities.

Father Edwin described the first group of boys who took the trip as "rowdy," and said there were difficulties in finding a place for these boys to complete their experiential learning requirements. The idea for the Appalachian Trail trip, which would later become known as "The Trail," arose out of a desperate requirement to get the rabble-rousers off campus and into the world.

Something happened during that first four-day journey that changed the boys, according to Father Edwin. Navigating blindly through unfamiliar terrain and faced with elemental hurdles such as rainstorms and muddy trails, the boys were required to work as a team with their fellow classmates and teachers to survive. "It is an absolute miracle that we all came back, that first trip," Father Edwin remarked.

The teachers at Saint Benedict's quickly realized that there was a lot of potential and benefits with the Appalachian trail trip, and the hike would set the school apart from other preparatory schools in the area. By the next year, completion of the hike was a mandatory requirement for all freshmen class members.

That year, Father Mark Payne, O.S.B., a Benedictine monk, joined the Saint Benedict's staff as a physics teacher and is credited with transforming the nature of the hike into "The Trail" that students and alumni know and love. Payne, who was an experienced outdoorsman and Boy Scout Troop Leader, developed the Group System, which the school still uses to this day, to delegate tasks such as cooking, navigating, first aid, and building shelter to individual students. The system also splits students into functional groups of eight and staggers their release on to the Appalachian Trail at intervals to avoid crossing one another's paths.

Fifty years ago, Father Edwin said, there was no way to imagine how impactful the program would become for both the school and the students who have participated in it.

"In that first year, we were not even sure if the school would still be there," he said. "There was no way of imagining the future of the project and what it would become… God just put together a group of people who could take ideas and make them real in a brief period."

Alumni have returned to Saint Benedict's to share stories about how The Trail changed their lives.

"You can talk to people who walked The Trail 40 years ago, and they still know the names of the other seven men who walked with them," he said.

He recounted the story of an alumni whose entire trail group attended his father's funeral —a full eight years after graduating from the school — a testament to the strong bonds created between the students during the project.

A full year of preparation goes into the trip. The journey begins during the Freshman Overnight, an orientation experience wherein all freshmen learn and buy in to Saint Ben-

edict's ethos of community, student leadership, counseling, and experiential education. The experience lasts a full week and includes students attending school, completing orientation activities, and sleeping each night on the gym floor.

During that week, students are assigned to their trail group; the eight fellow classmates they will eventually travel with through the Appalachian wilderness in the spring of their freshman year. They also learn The Trail mantra, "Stay Together," a term coined by Father Payne, which helps the freshmen through challenges they encounter while navigating the Appalachian Mountains trails.

"The mantra… becomes crucial to their experience at SBP throughout their four years here," Father Edwin said. "It is essential to who we are, what we do, how our leadership structure works, and what we communicate to the students all the time. It's about realizing you are responsible for one another, along with the message, 'Whatever hurts my brother or sister hurts me. Whatever helps my brother helps me,' which is the Saint Benedict's motto."

The students train formally for the journey every day for four weeks with prayer, meditation over Bible stories, and training sessions in basic camping skills. For many of the students at Saint Benedict's, The Trail is their first experience leaving the inner city and going out to the woods, according to Father Edwin.

"We have kids who navigate dangerous blocks in the city, where ugly inhuman stuff goes on," said Father Edwin said in an interview with the Appalachian Trail Conservancy for the short film "Stay Together." "But take them out on the trail, and it's dark and it's silent, which are things that people who live in the city never experience. And kids will tell you – they'll get mad at you – it scares the heck out of them."

The more obstacles the students face along their journey, the better their experience is, Father Edwin said. "When it rains and their feet are wet, that is how you tell the metal of these kids."

To acclimate students to the outdoor experience of camping overnight, a three-day practice hike is held at the Benedictine Abbey property in Sandyston, N.J.

During the journey, each student keeps a journal to document their experiences. Every morning the groups meet in formation to pray together. The story of Exodus is read to the students as they prepare for their journey and throughout the hike.

"This experience taught me a lot," said Kaleb Hassell, a current sophomore at Saint Benedict's, who also serves as a Freshmen Counselor and Admissions Team Leader. "It taught me how to survive in an environment that I'm not used to being in. It also taught me to – as we say at Benedict's – 'be comfortable in the uncomfortable,' to be taken out of the city and be put in the woods for a total of five days."

The trail experience enabled him "to see, simply the beautiful thing that God created – nature. While walking the trail, I was continually reminded of the story of Creation, which is in the book of Genesis. Seeing the trees, hearing the birds and the wind, and seeing the view of valleys from high mountaintops really left me with the simple words 'God is good.'"

Over the past 50 years, some changes have been made to the tradition of The Trail. In 2020, following the closure of adjacent schools and the advocacy of a group of determined young women who wanted to continue their education in the Benedictine tradition, Saint Benedict's opened a Girls Prep Division. Female students also take part in the traditional hike, although boys and girls do not travel in the same groups or share tents.

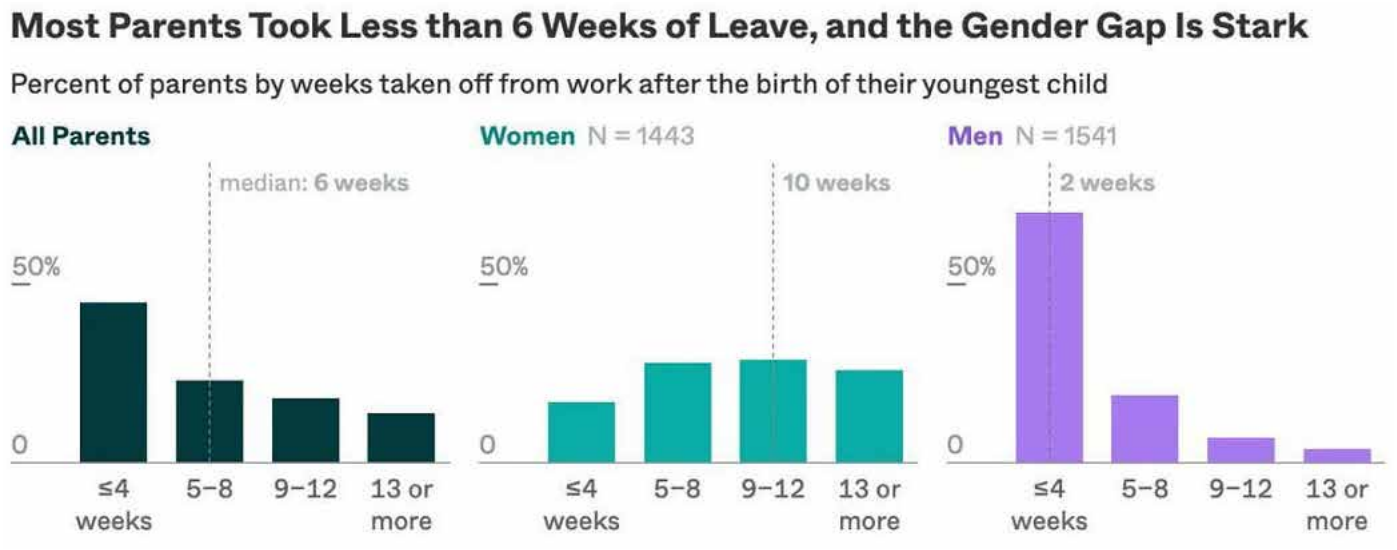
Lucia Gallo, a junior in the Girls Prep Division, Freshman Leader, and Co-Head of the Admissions Team has gone on The Trail twice. "I've learned so much about those around me because of the time we were able to spend with each other. Walking in the woods for eight hours really gives you the chance to get to know someone," Gallo said.

The trail experience helps participants learn to believe in themselves.

"I have learned that sometimes everyone needs a push to get started," Gallo said, "There were many times that the girls around me didn't believe that they were going to make it out or able to finish the day. Once they had the support of those around them, they started to believe in themselves."

What Do Parents With Young Children Want? A New National Survey Offers a Glimpse

Emily Tate Sullivan, ZERO2EIGHT, May 27, 2026



Based on responses from 2,894 parents who were employed and returned to work when their youngest child was born. Parents were asked to share how much time they took off, irrespective of whether it was paid or unpaid leave. (New America)

A majority of parents with young children do not have the work or childcare arrangements that they want, with their biggest concern being the lack of quality time with their children, according to a new report published by the New Practice Lab at New America.

This mismatch between families' current realities and ideal scenarios begins early — as soon as their children are born, when the parental leave they are able to take is often less time than they want.

It may not be altogether surprising that parents in the United States are not satisfied with their leave, care and work options. After all, it is one of the only developed nations that lacks a national paid-leave program for new parents, and childcare in this country is unaffordable and inaccessible to many families.

Still, these findings add an important dimension to the conversation about raising children in America: The survey is nationally representative and the largest-of-its-kind, reaching about 5,500 parents and primary caregivers with children from birth to age 5, including nearly 3,000 parents with household income below 200% of the federal poverty level or about $66,000 or less for a family of four.

But it's more than that, said Alyson Silkowski, senior policy adviser at the New Practice Lab, a team focused on improving economic outcomes for American families with young children, and one of the authors of the report.

"There's a lot we know about what's not working," Silkowski said of earlier data and surveys on families. "We were keen to add to this conversation about parenthood in America — what it is parents actually want as they think about these early years."

The simplest answer to what parents want, they found, is more time and more money.

Nearly three in four parents said they want more quality time with their children, such as playing, being outside and traveling. Instead, they feel much of their "free" time is spent doing housework such as cooking and cleaning. These findings hold across income levels, geography, race and ethnicity.

More than half of parents — 55% — said they wanted more time off with their child after they were born, and that's true for both moms and dads.

"Neither are getting what they want," Silkowski noted.

Priscilla Welsh, a mom of two living in a suburb of Denver, lost her job while pregnant with her first child a few years ago after the company that employed her went out of business. When their son was born, Welsh was not working, and her husband, who is self-employed, "took a pause" from work to be at home with his family, she shared.

"It was a rougher period of very tight finances with our first-born," she said. "You want to snuggle your newborn and feel relaxed, but it was top of mind for me — how little money we had."

When Welsh had their second child, in 2025, her husband was able to take advantage of Colorado's state paid parental leave program, which was approved by voters in 2020 and became available to families in early 2024. He was able to take 12 weeks of paid leave to be at home with his wife, toddler and newborn son, which Welsh described as "amazing."

As for money, the New Practice Lab found that financial concerns seem to be leading families to choose work and childcare arrangements that do not reflect their preferences.

Nearly nine in 10 parents said they want to work some amount, including 91% of dads and 85% of moms, but 75% said their current work arrangement is not one they want.

Welsh has not returned to the workforce since she lost her job during her first pregnancy, but she would like to if she can find the right position, she said. Ideally, she'd work one day a week in an event-planning role. She loves the challenge-and-reward cycle of paid work, and she also thinks it would be good for her as a parent.

"I want to miss them," she said of her sons, who are 2.5 years and 10 months old. "[Working] would help me miss them and be a better mom when I'm around them."

She added: ""Being a mom is just one challenge after another after another. But there's no big reward. It's like, 'Potty training is over!' But no, potty training is never over."

In her paid jobs of the past, Welsh would work really hard to complete a task or a project, then get appreciation and acknowledgement for it, she said — "rather than being a parent, where you're never finished." She thinks that returning to the labor force would "stretch" her in a good way.

The main reason she isn't working now is because she isn't looking — because she doesn't think that what she is seeking is even out there.

"Part of me just doesn't believe it exists, or that I'd be paid high enough that it would be worth my time," she said.

Many moms — and some dads — with young children seem to share Welsh's desire for more flexible, part-time work.

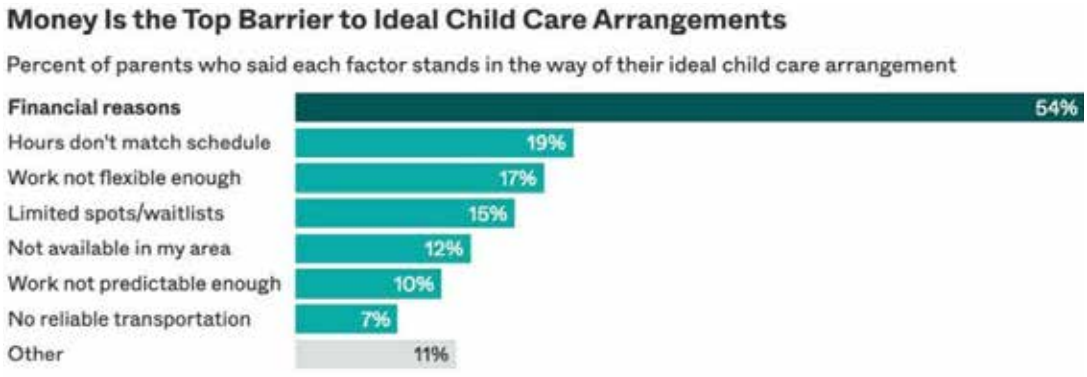
Of the parents who said they prefer to work, 30% of moms and 64% of dads said they want to work full-time, compared to 28% of moms and 15% of dads who want flexible work and 25% of moms and 12% of dads who want part-time work.

About a third of respondents said they preferred to care for their children themselves in their ideal scenario, while 19% wanted a combination of care, 18% wanted another parent to do the caregiving, 15% wanted formal settings, 11% wanted a relative or friend, and 5% wanted a nanny or sitter.

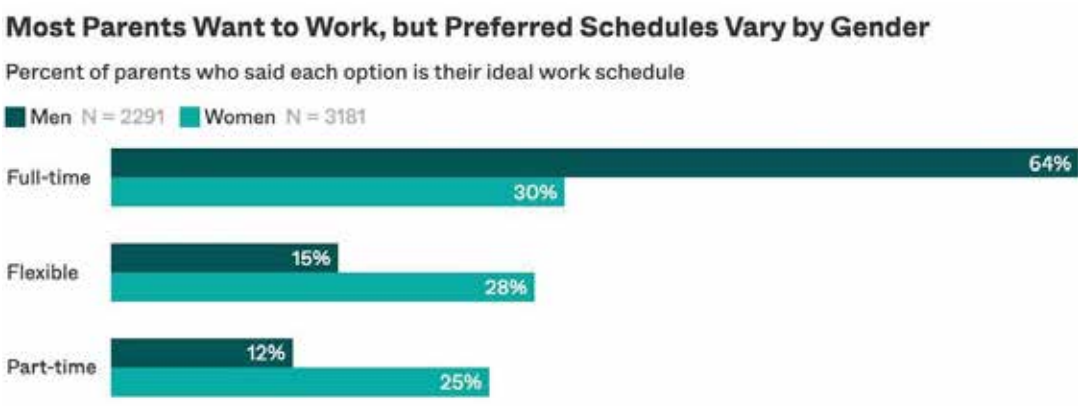
"There wasn't a single solution that crossed the 50% threshold," noted Amira Choueiki Boland, chief of staff at the New Practice Lab and an author of the report.

Boland also acknowledged that many families seem to have modest expectations for what can change about their circumstances — whether it's more parental leave or more satisfying work and childcare arrangements.

"We're conditioned to what we think is possible," Boland said, recalling how "astounded" she was to observe the system of support in place for colleagues who took parental leave when she worked in Canada. "[We should be] opening up our aperture to what other societies have figured out to make this work better."



Based on responses from 4,271 parents whose current child care arrangement does not fully match their ideal arrangements. Parents were asked to select all options that apply. (New America)



Parents who selected "prefer not to work" are not shown. (New America)

Union Public Schools using home visits to fight chronic absenteeism among students

Tess Maune, News On 6, March 3, 2026

State records show that Oklahoma students are missing school more often than before the COVID-19 pandemic. Districts classify students as "chronically absent" when they miss 10 or more days of school, whether the absences are excused or unexcused.

Since the pandemic, the number of chronically absent students statewide has hovered around 20%.

At Union Public Schools, the trend has continued to climb year after year. Records show that more than 26% of Union students were chronically absent last year, roughly 7 percentage points higher than the state average.

In this edition of Educate Oklahoma, News On 6's Tess Maune found the district is trying a hands-on strategy to address the problem.

Role Focused on Student Engagement

Work is underway inside Rebekah Boyer's office at Union High School, helping a recent graduate plan his next steps in life.

"I do—I plan to further my education, to learn a new trade," Osvaldo Lopez Badilla said.

But Boyer's work happens far beyond the school building.

"In my role, I've tried to be very intentional about direct in-person communication," Boyer said.

Boyer serves as the High School Assistant Principal for Student Engagement, where she is tasked with bringing a new approach to helping chronically absent students reconnect with school.

"My goal is primarily to create a pathway for these students," she said. "It's problematic. I think last year, the district as a whole faced a 25 to 30% chronic absenteeism rate. That edges up as you get into secondary school."

Knocking on Doors to Find Students
That goal often takes Boyer on the road.

Alongside her secretary and translator, Norma Estrada, Boyer spends time going door-to-door to check on students who have stopped showing up to class.

"When we have students who are credit deficient or we have students who aren't coming to school, the only way I knew how to fix it was to go find them, right?" Boyer said.

News On 6 rode along as they made several visits.

Stop #1

At the first stop, no one answered the door, but the student's father picked up the phone.

"Hi, sir, we're here regarding your daughter. We're a bit concerned. She's not been attending classes regularly," Boyer told him.

The single father had no idea his daughter had been skipping school—something Boyer says happens frequently. He met with Boyer the next morning, and the student is getting back on track.

Stop #2

At another home, the team spoke with a sophomore they had met before.

"Hola. Hola. It's us again," the two said.

The student told them she felt overwhelmed by the size of the high school and didn't like attending. Boyer discussed alternative options.

Boyer said she felt they made some progress but will have to keep following up.

"Our ultimate goal is to see her get her diploma," Boyer said. "So if it's with us, great. If not, we would help her guide her to some other institutions."

Stop #3

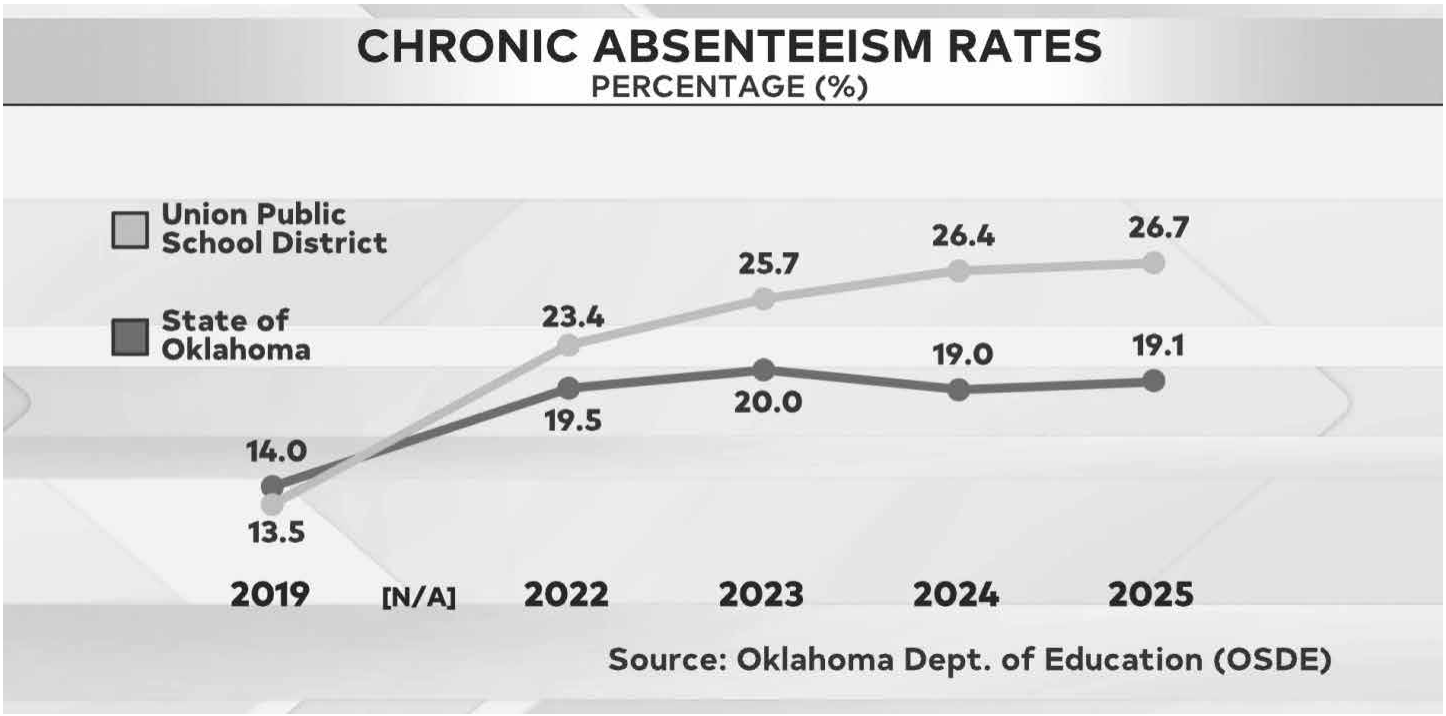
At the final house, no one answered the door or the phone.

"Doing home visits isn't going to shift the societal issue of chronic absenteeism, but it's going to make a difference of those we recapture," Boyer said.

Even so, Boyer says these face-to-face visits help staff understand the challenges students are facing—and give new ideas on how to keep it from happening.

Addressing Attendance in Other Ways

The door knocks are one of many ways the district is addressing students not showing up for class. Beginning in the 2024-2025 school year, the district put posters in the hallway displaying "lame excuses" for missing class, like "Taylor dropped a new album," or "Celebrating my cat's birthday," as part of a campaign to raise awareness on how important attendance is.



Union Public Schools also surveyed students to better understand why they miss class.

After not feeling well, the most common reasons included:

- Lack of interest in the class
- Feeling overwhelmed by life outside school
- Not getting enough sleep
- Having other responsibilities, such as a job

"I didn't see how I could do school and work at the same time"
For Osvaldo Lopez Badilla, working full-time pulled him out of school last fall.

"I needed to work, and I needed to help my family," he said. "You feel very lost. You feel like, why is this pressure on me?"

He said Boyer and Estrada's visit helped lift that weight

"It definitely shows a higher level of respect and care to students," Osvaldo said.

Osvaldo had good grades and was just a few credit hours away from finishing high school. With a customized plan and support from the district, he was able to graduate early.

"Definitely a lot of sleepless nights, going to work and opening a laptop, and just doing the work that had to be done. It was just…being committed and just: stand center, focus on the goal," Osvaldo said. "Definitely a big accomplishment. Not just in my life, but for my family, for the struggles that they overcame."

A Long-Term Goal: 100% Graduation Rate

Union leaders say their ultimate goal is a 100% graduation rate.

Boyer says progress will take time, but the effort to connect with students is already making a difference.

"We're building connections and building bridges," she said. "And so the work is important, in order for it to create larger-scale change."

And with every knock on a door, the district hopes to bring another student back to the classroom.

The full results of Union's survey, including what teachers, parents and students had to say can be found at: *https://cdn.griffin.news/8b/47/6bc2b3d246fb9ad30ca243e394f9/union-attendance-surveys-todd-nelson-update-1.pdf* .

Psychology says children whose parents made them "figure it out" instead of rescuing them display these 7 strengths

Allison Price, Artful Parent, January 31, 2026

You know that moment when your child is struggling with their shoelaces, and every fiber of your being wants to swoop in and tie them?

Last week, I watched my two-year-old spend nearly fifteen minutes trying to get his rain boots on the right feet. He got frustrated, tried again, sat down, stood up, and eventually figured it out. The pride on his face was worth every second of biting my tongue.

We live in a world where helicopter parenting has become the norm. But what if I told you that stepping back and letting kids struggle through challenges on their own might be one of the greatest gifts we can give them?

Research in child psychology consistently shows that children whose parents encouraged independence by letting them "figure it out" develop distinct strengths that serve them throughout life.

As someone who spent seven years in the kindergarten classroom before becoming a mom, I've seen firsthand the difference between kids who've been allowed to problem-solve and those who've been rescued from every difficulty.

The truth is, when we resist the urge to fix everything for our children, we're actually building their confidence, resilience, and capability. Let me share the seven remarkable strengths that emerge when we step back and let our kids lead the way.

1. They develop exceptional problem-solving skills

Remember those wooden shape puzzles we all played with as kids? I watched a parent recently grab the square piece from their toddler and place it in the correct spot because the child was "taking too long." My heart sank a little.

When children are given space to work through problems, their brains form new neural pathways. They learn to approach challenges from different angles, test hypotheses, and develop creative solutions.

My five-year-old recently spent an entire afternoon figuring out how to build a fairy house that wouldn't fall over in the wind. Did it take forever? Yes. Did she learn more than if I'd shown her how? Absolutely.

The research backs this up too. Studies show that children who are allowed to struggle through age-appropriate challenges develop stronger executive function skills, which are crucial for academic success and life management.

2. They build genuine self-confidence

There's a massive difference between the confidence that comes from constant praise and the confidence that comes from actual achievement. When kids figure things out themselves, they develop what psychologists call "earned confidence."

I grew up in a small Midwest town with pretty traditional parents who believed in letting us work things out. When I struggled with math homework, my mom would say, "Try it three more times, then come show me what you've done." Usually, by the third attempt, something would click.

This approach teaches kids that they're capable. They learn to trust their own judgment and abilities because they've proven to themselves, repeatedly, that they can handle challenges.

3. They become more emotionally resilient

Have you ever noticed how some kids completely fall apart at the smallest setback while others bounce back quickly? The difference often lies in how much practice they've had dealing with frustration and disappointment.

When we let children work through difficult emotions while solving problems, we're essentially giving them emotional weightlifting practice. They learn that frustration is temporary, that persistence pays off, and that they can handle uncomfortable feelings.

My approach with both my kids has always been to acknowledge their feelings while encouraging them to keep trying. "I can see you're frustrated. What could you try differently?" This validates their emotions while reinforcing their capability to handle them.

4. They develop stronger independence and autonomy

Kids who are encouraged to figure things out naturally develop a stronger sense of independence. They're not constantly looking to adults for validation or direction because they've learned to trust their own judgment.

In my kindergarten teaching days, I could always spot the kids whose parents let them pack their own backpacks and choose their own clothes. They moved through the classroom with purpose and confidence, making decisions without constantly seeking approval.

Natural consequences are powerful teachers here. When

my daughter forgets her library book, she experiences the disappointment of not being able to check out a new one. No lecture from me needed. She rarely forgets now.

5. They become better at handling failure

Failure is one of life's greatest teachers, but only if we're allowed to experience it. Children who are rescued from every potential failure never develop the crucial skill of bouncing back from setbacks.

I believe in natural consequences over punishment because they teach without shaming. When my son insists on wearing his superhero cape to the park and it gets caught on the slide, he learns to think ahead next time. No "I told you so" needed.

These small failures in childhood prepare kids for bigger challenges later. They learn that failure isn't the end of the world, just information about what to try differently next time.

6. They develop better critical thinking abilities

When children are constantly told what to do and how to do it, they miss out on developing critical thinking skills. But when they're encouraged to figure things out, they naturally start asking important questions: Why isn't this working? What could I try instead? What happened last time?

Yesterday, my daughter was trying to figure out why her planted seeds weren't growing. Instead of explaining, I asked, "What do plants need to grow?" She thought about it, realized she'd been keeping them in a dark closet, and moved them to the window. Pure learning magic.

This questioning mindset serves them throughout life, making them better students, employees, and eventually, parents themselves.

7. They build stronger perseverance and grit

Grit, that combination of passion and perseverance, is one of the strongest predictors of success in life. And it's built through practice, specifically through working through challenges without giving up.

Children who are allowed to struggle learn that most problems have solutions if you keep trying. They develop what researchers call a "growth mindset," believing that abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work.

My two-year-old's determination with those couch cushion forts amazes me. Sometimes they fall, sometimes they stand, but he keeps building. That's grit in its purest form.

Finding the balance

Of course, this doesn't mean we never help our children or leave them to struggle with inappropriate challenges. The key is finding the sweet spot between support and independence.

Age-appropriate challenges are crucial. We're not talking about letting a toddler figure out how to cross a busy street or leaving a kindergartener to navigate complex social situations alone.

We're talking about stepping back when they're working on a puzzle, letting them pour their own milk (even if it spills), and allowing them to resolve minor conflicts with siblings or friends.

The goal isn't to make life harder for our kids. It's to prepare them for a world that won't always cushion their falls. When we trust our children to figure things out, we're sending a powerful message: "I believe in your ability to handle this."

Sometimes the greatest act of love is stepping back, taking a deep breath, and letting our children discover just how capable they really are.

Myth: Children Learn by Sitting

Rae Pica, Community Playthings, July 2024

It's hard to know where to begin when addressing the many consequences of the myth that children learn best while sitting. Alfred North Whitehead (1929) writes, "I lay it down as an educational axiom that in teaching you will come to grief as soon as you forget that your pupils have bodies." Nearly one hundred years later, we still haven't taken his words seriously.

Among the examples of "grief" we're seeing are escalating behavior challenges in early childhood settings. Over the past couple of decades, an increasing number of veteran teachers have told me they've never before witnessed so many behavioral disruptions. It doesn't come as a surprise to me. The timing coincides with the period during which children's movement and play opportunities decreased and unrealistic expectations increased. As I write in Acting Out!:

"Just like any other young animal, young children are born to move! When we remove that option, they become restless and frustrated. Restless, frustrated children fidget. They act out. When they're told over and over again to sit still, they begin to feel like failures—at three or four years old—because they can't do what an important adult is asking them to do. When a teacher repeatedly sends home notes with a three-year-old child because he's not able to sit still...what happens to his natural joy? How can he comply when he's not developmentally equipped to do so? How can he see school as a place he wants to be? As a place that's safe? Because he has no choice but to be there, how can he not act out?" (Pica 2019, 2)

Young children don't have the emotional or verbal ability to express their frustration and dismay. Acting out is the way children tell us things are not OK with them.

There are also physical reasons for the children's distress. Because our bodies were designed to be upright, walking, running, and generally on the move—not sitting for extended periods—children forced to do the latter become tired and unable to concentrate. This naturally makes them cranky! Educator and author Eric Jensen tells us that sitting for more than ten minutes at a time reduces our awareness of physical and emotional sensations, even for adults. Also, the pressure on a person's spinal discs is 30 percent greater while the person is sitting than while the person is standing, reducing blood flow. Jensen (2000) writes, "These problems reduce concentration and attention, and ultimately result in discipline problems" (30).

Lack of movement creates other problems that show up in classrooms as well. Many teachers are seeing more children unable to cross the midline of the body (the invisible vertical line that extends from the head to the toes and divides the body into left and right sides). Further research indicates that because reading and writing involve moving the eyes from left to right and an inability to cross the midline impacts visual tracing, problems can arise with reading and writing (Carter 2019).

A more recent phenomenon is that children are falling out of their chairs (Strauss 2017). One first-grade teacher counted the number of occurrences and reported forty-four in a week, likening it to twenty-three penguins trying to sit in chairs. Experiences like these aren't isolated to this one classroom. Many teachers have raised their hands when I've asked if they've witnessed this. Pediatric occupational therapist Angela Hanscom (2016) explains that children are getting too few opportunities to develop their proprioceptive and vestibular senses, which are typically developed by age six. The activities nature intended to develop these senses are among those we often warn children against these days: spinning, swinging, hanging upside down, running and changing directions, and rolling down hills. Such movements are part of nature's plan to prepare children to be able to sit still.

Many adults seem to believe that if we simply insist the little ones be still, those who are "well-behaved" will comply. But the truth is, complying will require the concentration they could be using to complete a more important task. Being still is actually a very challenging form of balance requiring mature proprioceptive and vestibular sense. Motor development literature tells us that three-year-olds can sit still for only five to ten minutes at a time, five-year-olds for fifteen minutes, and seven-year-olds for just twenty-five minutes. Yet school practices often require sitting for far greater lengths at far younger ages.

Last but not least, this myth is directly detrimental to children's learning—the one thing sitting is supposed to achieve. Active, experiential learners who acquire and retain information using multiple senses simply will not learn optimally when seated. And "active, experiential learner" perfectly describes young children.

The Truth

The truth here is two-pronged: the research proves that physical activity improves brain functioning, and young children are not yet abstract thinkers, which means they require active, experiential learning. We'll look at both aspects in this section.

Clearly, nature's plan for the development of both the brain and the body didn't involve sitting. And if sitting causes fatigue and a lack of concentration, how can anyone with this knowledge imagine that children learn best when seated? As teacher Dee Kalman once said to me, "When the bum is numb, the mind is dumb." That contention is not only backed up by her personal experience but also by research.

For example, the University of Illinois's Dr. Chuck Hillman has shared images online of two brain scans, in which one shows the brain after sitting quietly and the other following a twenty-minute walk. The difference is remarkable, with the latter far more "lit up" than the former. That's because, as education expert Eric Jensen once told me, "The brain is constantly responding to environmental input. Compared to a baseline of sitting in a chair, walking, moving, and active learning bump up blood flow and key chemicals for focus and long-term memory (norepinephrine) as well as for effort and mood (dopamine)."

Researchers from the Institute of Medicine (Adams 2013) report that "children who are more active show greater attention [and] have faster cognitive processing speed...than children who are less active."

We also know that moderate-to vigorous-intensity physical activity—the kind that increases breathing and gets the heart pumping a little or a lot, respectively—provides the brain with water, glucose, and oxygen. This is brain food, without which optimal learning can't occur. Annie Murphy Paul (2021) tells us that "moderate-intensity exercise experienced for a small length of time increases humans' ability to think both during and immediately after (for as long as two hours after) the activity." She adds:

"The positive changes documented by scientists include an increase in the capacity to focus attention and resist distraction; greater verbal fluency and cognitive flexibility; enhanced problem-solving and decision-making abilities; and increased working memory, as well as more durable long-term memory for what is learned." (51)

We can't ignore fidgeting, which, Paul (2021) contends we associate with moral shiftiness. While teachers may not necessarily relate it to morality, they may often consider fidgeting misbehavior, or at the very least find it distracting and insist that it stop. But that will prove counterproductive. Occupational therapist Angela Hanscom (2014) tells us:

"Children are going to class with bodies that are less prepared to learn than ever before. With sensory systems not quite working right, they are asked to sit and pay attention. Children naturally start fidgeting, in order to get the movement their body so desperately needs and is not getting enough of to 'turn their brain on'. What happens when the children start fidgeting? We ask them to sit still and pay attention; therefore, their brain goes back to 'sleep.' "

While adults often believe children must stop moving in order to focus, researchers have discovered that the opposite is true. When children are involved in an experience requiring working memory and cognitive processing, they need to move so they can focus (Nicholas 2020). This can be even truer for children with attention disorders, as their brains are continually under-aroused. In a 2015 study, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) researcher Dr. Dustin Sarver found that movements like moving and spinning in a chair meant children with ADHD performed better on tasks requiring concentration because the small physical motions awakened the nervous system and increased alertness. These movements, according to Sarver, work much in the same way the stimulant drug Ritalin does (Kamenetz 2015; Sarver et al. 2015). According to Sarver, when we tell children to sit still or stop moving, they are using all of their mental energy to focus on that rule, which prevents them from focusing on whatever task we want them to do (Sarver et al. 2015).

As active learners, children need to physically experience concepts to fully grasp them. Pumping data through their eyes, their ears, and the seat of their pants is not ideal. Because they're not yet abstract thinkers, seeing a word such as enormous on a worksheet, even if accompanied by an illustration, is not nearly as impactful as demonstrating enormous with the body. The latter is a concrete experience. The children not only hear the word but also feel it and look at their classmates and see it. Once they've been enormous, they never forget the word. Similarly, when children move over, under, around, through, beside, and near objects and others, they better grasp the meaning of these prepositions and positional concepts (falling under both emergent literacy and geometry). When they perform a slow walk or hop lightly, adjectives and adverbs become much more than abstract ideas. When children physically experience long, short, wide, and narrow shapes with their body or body parts, quantitative (math) concepts are no longer abstract. Scientific concepts such as balance and stability, action and reaction, and gravity are also understood best when physically experienced. Seeing these concepts on a worksheet or computer screen does not lend itself to authentic learning, which involves true comprehension. Children require active learning. Active learning may take many forms, but few of them involve sitting.

Here are the words of one of my education heroes, neurophysiologist Carla Hannaford (2007), who writes:

"The notion that intellectual activity can somehow exist apart from our bodies is deeply rooted in our culture.... This idea is also the basis of a lot of educational theory and practice that make learning harder and less successful than it could be."

"Thinking and learning are not all in our head. On the contrary, the body plays an integral part in all our intellectual processes from early movements in utero right through to old age." (15).

This is what families, administrators, and policy makers need to understand: children do not exist only from the neck up, and our persistence in acting as though they do results in negative consequences for both their bodies and their brains.

Rae Pica is on a mission to ensure that children have the

chance to be children, and that child development guides all our interactions with them. An online course creator and keynote speaker (virtual only these days), Rae is also the author of 23 books, including What If Everybody Understood Child Development? and Why Play: How to Make Play and Essential Part of Early Education. You can learn more about her work at www.raepica.com.

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What Parents Want: How Policies Can Spur School-to-Family Connections and Build Trust

Lisa Guernsey, Elise Franchino, Susana Beltrán-Grimm, Sheila R. Thomas, Miroslava Rodríguez, New America, June 18, 2025

Helping parents and caregivers feel connected to their children's school may sound as easy as hosting a back-to-school night. But on-the-ground stories from educators and parents show a desire for more. Caregivers all over the country are demanding better communication and more respect for their concerns, and whether that's tied to the parents' rights movement or not, there is mounting research about the benefits of improving school-to-family dynamics.

Fortunately, both schools and families want change. Parents want to be part of the conversation with teachers and school staff in helping their kids succeed, and principals and teachers want to forge better relationships with parents. But it will take new strategies to overcome the myriad time and resource constraints, cultural differences, misunderstandings about schools and families, and language barriers that get in the way.

Over the past school year, 2024–2025, a group of education leaders in southwestern Pennsylvania, working with a program called Parents as Allies and a team of innovators from outside their districts selected by New America's Learning Sciences Exchange (LSX) program, resolved to tackle some of these issues. They began with the premise that instead of pushing messages to parents and trying to get them to listen, school leaders should flip the script, listening to parents first. They also committed to redesigning systems that were not working well.

Tabitha Marino, an assistant superintendent of New Castle School District and another fellow on the project, said talking to parents was one of Parents as Allies' key messages. "Once schools start inviting parents in, working with parents and communicating with parents, that's when everything starts moving in the right direction, that's what fosters that student success," Marino said.

By the time these innovators had finished their projects, they had designed four new resources and approaches for engaging with families in their districts, working with and eliciting feedback from parents along the way. Their simple tools and techniques, which can be borrowed and adapted in schools and districts around the country, are examples of low-cost solutions that can have a big impact in building trust and creating conditions for lasting relationships between parents, caregivers, school leaders, and teachers. These relationships build social capital, strengthening communities in the long run.

Applying the Research on Family Engagement and Student Success

This year-long experiment was started by LSX, a fellowship model that invites mid-career experts from different fields to collaborate and build a shared language for solving problems. LSX focuses on communicating and applying the science of learning. In this particular challenge, it drew from scientific studies that emphasize the role of adults—whether parents or educators—in motivating children and selecting activities and resources that help them to do well in school.

Over the past 35 years, the research on the role of the adults in children's lives has dovetailed with research on how parents interact with their children's teachers and schools, and how much those interactions affect children's academic success. Scores of studies have investigated multiple dimensions of parent-teacher relationships and family-school partnerships. Among the many findings, experts stress that there is a crucial distinction between family involvement, often characterized by parents attending school events or volunteering, and family engagement, in which parents and caregivers work with teachers in shaping their children's learning experiences, setting mutual goals for their children, and making decisions alongside educators.

Building on this distinction, scholars have emphasized the home, school, and community as major settings to support children's well-being and success in school. Fifteen years ago, the National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement (NAFSCE), a membership organization for educators, parent liaisons, community engagement specialists, and school leaders, devised a comprehensive definition of family engagement. In 2024, it published a strategic framework, which, among other commitments, aims to "share power with families as full and equal partners in their children's learning and in school improvement."

The work by NAFSCE and other education organizations also builds on decades of studies showing that children's success as learners begins at home, early in their lives, where parents and caregivers act as children's first teachers, laying the foundation for lifelong learning. When parents and children read together, tell stories, and play educational games, they build early literacy and math skills. To supplement and encourage these home-based activities, schools have begun to provide more opportunities for parents to connect with educators through family nights that highlight special cultural connections and showcase students' projects, as well as through family workshops and parent-teacher councils. These efforts foster student success and empower parents to advocate for their children.

Community-based partnerships also play a crucial role in kids' success by connecting families to local resources and networks of support. Partnerships between schools, librar-

ies, afterschool programs, community centers, universities, and cultural organizations foster meaningful learning opportunities for children and families, and underscore the importance of neighborhood and community contexts. These cross-sector collaborations, such as Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors, have been shown to improve parents' understanding of literacy development beginning at home, and they emphasize the need for culturally relevant materials to support student learning. Collaborations between libraries and literacy and STEM coalitions contribute to children's academic and emotional well-being. Remake Learning Days, a multi-week-long regional festival of learning—which got its start in Pittsburgh—is a vibrant example, featuring in-school and out-of-school hands-on learning activities for families throughout different neighborhoods. And PBS stations across the country have collaborated with libraries, housing authorities, and community centers to expand services that promote good educational outcomes and empower families as advocates for their children's learning.

This burgeoning community context means that schools today have many partners to lean on and parents' experiences to build upon. This has sparked a new approach to family engagement: to design solutions with parents and caregivers, rather than presuming to design programs for them. This co-design approach, as it is becoming known in education circles, makes families into collaborators, rather than passive recipients of information or merely event attendees. It fosters trust, increases relevance, and promotes stronger connections between home and school. Co-design reframes family engagement not as a one-size-fits-all outreach effort, but as a transformative, community-centered process that advances educational equity.

Laying the Foundation for Conversation, Dialogue, and Empathy

This year's project started with a team of innovators made up of seven experts chosen in a competitive selection process to become the fourth cohort of the LSX fellows program. These seven people included three school leaders in the Pittsburgh area, one researcher, one journalist, one social entrepreneur, and one children's book author, who is a former educator who has consulted with school districts on improving relationships with families.

LSX tapped these fellows to work with Parents as Allies, a program started in 2021 by Kidsburgh, a family media project in Pittsburgh. By 2024–2025, Parents as Allies had established parent-educator teams in 31 school districts across southwestern Pennsylvania to rethink family engagement and solve problems collaboratively. The LSX fellows, three of whom were leaders in districts with Parents as Allies programs, built upon a series of "empathy interviews" school leaders had conducted the year before, in which parents interviewed teachers and teachers interviewed parents in order, according to the Parents as Allies guidebook, to "better understand the different perspectives of these groups and their experiences with the school—positive, negative, and neutral." Those interviews helped prepare the LSX fellows to talk with parents, get their feedback, and enlist their expertise.

Designing New Strategies and Easy-to-Use Tools

The fellows were trained in design thinking techniques and had access to $7,500 ($2,500 for each of the three schools) to develop a new practice, tool, or resource that could help improve communication and build trust with families, especially those new to the school community. Each school varied widely in terms of demographics and income levels, and therefore needed different solutions. (Our blog post, "Designing Tools to Strengthen Communication and Relationships Between Families and Schools," provides a fuller description of the schools and strategies, as well as links to PDFs of the flyers, maps, and websites created.) Below is a brief description of three of the four projects. Note: A fourth project, creating a redesigned school calendar for Avonworth Primary Center, also emerged from the parent interviews and will be described in an upcoming video produced by New America.

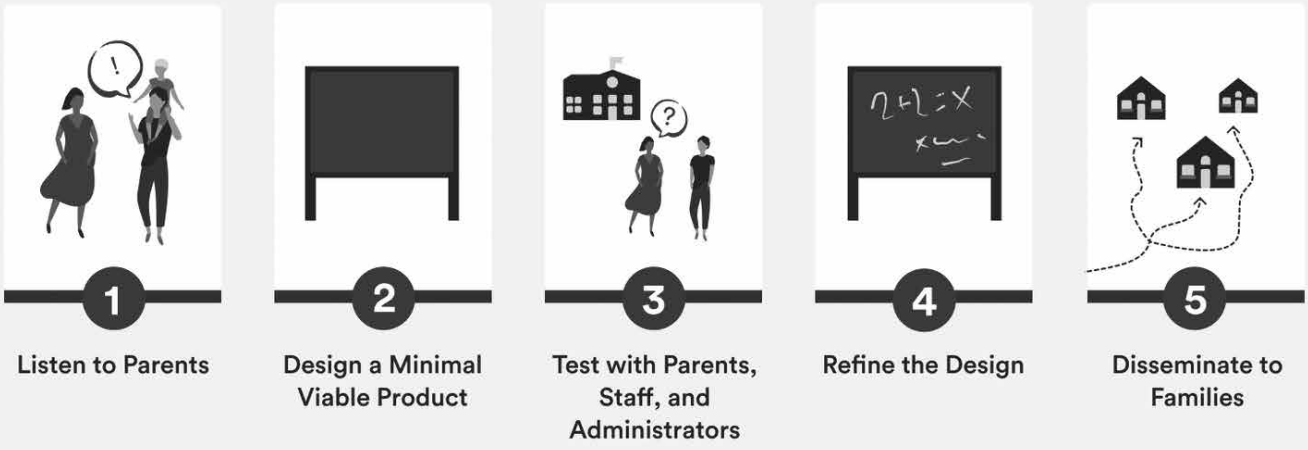
BRIDGE Builders at Avonworth

At Avonworth Primary Center, a K–2 school, Principal Scott Miller hosted a dinner and roundtable discussion with families that had moved to the school district after the school year had started. Miller's school boundaries encompass many long-settled families in the middle-income range (15 percent of students qualify for free-and-reduced price lunch) but the population is also growing, with many new families moving to the area. He wanted to find out what problems come from arriving mid-year. Contrary to Miller's initial assumptions, parents felt well connected with the school and their child's homeroom teacher, but they said they wished they could connect with families of other children in their new neighborhood. To this end, Miller and the other fellows designed a program they call the BRIDGE Builders—Building Relationships, Inspiring Dialogue, Growing Education—connecting families who transition mid-year to family representatives from each of Avonworth's five neighborhoods.

Community Resource Maps Around Duquesne

At Duquesne K–8 School, fellows created a neighborhood map in response to the wide range of needs raised by parents in anonymous questionnaires and one-on-one empathy interviews with the principal and LSX fellow Erica Slobodnik. At this school, in which 100 percent of students qualify for free and reduced-price lunch, and in which many newcomers speak a language other than English, families requested support finding a range of community resources including housing, child care, mental health services, transportation, internet access, and food pantries. So the fellows designed and produced a printed and online interactive map to address this need. They worked with the school resource team to identify local organizations, created the visuals for a paper version, and elicited feedback from parents by showing them the map during morning drop-off. They used that information to develop second and third drafts. Keep-

Figure 1 | Steps to Designing Tools Parents and Educators Want



ing in mind the community's language needs, they translated the map into all three languages spoken by families in the school and used icons to ensure the map will be usable regardless of literacy level.

Mobile-Friendly School Website at Lockley

At Harry W. Lockley Early Learning Center, a K–2 school in New Castle with 100 percent of students qualifying for lunch assistance, Assistant Superintendent Tabitha Marino and her staff conducted empathy interviews and gathered survey data from families on their experiences with the school. They learned that while parents appreciated the abundance of options for communication, they felt that there were too many platforms. They also described the district's website as challenging to navigate and noted that they accessed most information on their mobile phones. In response, Marino and her fellow fellows developed a streamlined website with staff using flexible and adaptable Padlet software and made it specific to the Lockley school, with contact information for teachers and staff, videos to help parents with new software, school calendars, and other resources families might seek. The team also designed a flyer with a QR code, which enables parents to use their mobile phones to quickly get to the website. The flyer will be inserted into the plastic transparent front sleeve of every red "take home" student folder.

Learning from the Process of Slowing Down and Seeking Feedback

The tools above will be rolled out to kick off the 2025–2026 school year. Principals and other leaders at these three schools will be able to track how much they are used by applying analytics technology (e.g., tallying the timing and frequency of QR code scans and website page views), and by collecting anecdotal and survey evidence from parents and teachers.

Yet if leaders focus only on the effectiveness of the tools, they will miss a key point that emerged over the year: The process of building the tools created a notable impact of its own. That process helped to change mindsets among LSX members of the team, especially among the school leaders who are often under extreme time pressure to roll things out quickly. This new approach required taking the time to hear ideas from parents and build opportunities for feedback loops. The work focused on "actually listening to our parents and seeing, 'what do they want?'" Slobodnik said.

After listening, the school leaders were able to iterate on their designs with the help of outside experts in journalistic interviewing, user testing, and parent engagement. The design-thinking approach also illuminated the importance of producing an early prototype or "minimum viable solution" and asking users for feedback that would be used to help finalize the design (see Figure 1). "One powerful element of this process and of this experience," Miller said, "is setting aside the direct time and the intentional time to collaborate and get feedback."

Perhaps most importantly, the process put human connection and family needs at the center of the problem-solving process, instead of focusing solely on information delivery. In schools, where there is a huge amount of new information for parents each year (school bus schedules, academic calendars, teachers' rules and expectations, curricula, reading assignments, new apps and software programs, report-card systems, and so on), educators can feel pressed to get all the information out to families as fast as possible. The LSX and Parents as Allies models encouraged school leaders to slow down. They discussed empathy interviews with the other fellows, strategized about the most pressing problems and what solutions could have an impact, and moved into the design phase with parents as key partners.

These kinds of processes, especially as they lead to positive responses and more engagement from parents, have widespread potential. We hope they will inspire other education leaders to build in feedback mechanisms that enable schools to evolve with community needs as they tackle different problems.

Replicating Success in More Schools: Five Suggestions for Policymakers

In a project like this, outcomes data initially take the form of testimonials and evidence of changes in school-system processes, not student test scores. We recognize that seeing and measuring the impact of this change on children's learning and families' sense of partnership with schools requires a longer time window and more robust measurement tools. But given the decades of scientific research showing positive academic outcomes tied to better engagement with families, and given the momentum behind the parents' rights movements today, policymakers should seize the opportunity to build out more of these kinds of initiatives and evaluate their impact.

Our experience in southwest Pennsylvania leads us to these five recommendations for education policymakers, whether on school boards or in state agencies and governor's offices:

1. Take an expansive approach. Instead of stipulating at the outset exactly what family engagement and its impact should look like, recognize that school leaders, teachers, parents, and caregivers will need time to build relationships and develop ideas together that match their local contexts. The map, website, and bridge-building program that emerged from this project were made possible by superintendents and other leaders who were willing to take chances on new approaches and who had open minds about what kinds of impact data and outcomes might emerge. The process was given as much respect as the product.

2. Measure impact in nontraditional ways. Over the past four years, Parents as Allies has helped school leaders take note of not only common measures of success (such as the number of participants) but also the uncommon ones, such as taking enough time over conversations with teachers and family members to learn that it is, say, a child's grandmother who is the more effective person to talk with about a child's literacy growth. Qualitative data collection (interviews with families and teachers, for example) can enable schools to gather powerful information about impact. This approach also helps to encourage new ways of connecting with parents who are not often heard from or seen at school events.

3. Provide time for co-design. Designing solutions with families and documenting, testing, and evaluating new tools and approaches takes time. At the Avonworth Primary Center, success emerged when the principal was able to pay for roundtable dinners designed to elicit parents' ideas for solving tough problems. At Duquesne K–8 School and the New Castle Lockley Early Learning Center, leaders opened up time and space for parents to provide feedback on different communication tools, for interviewers to document their critiques, and for new versions to be developed and brought to parents for more feedback. This iterative process showed respect for parents' ideas and improved the quality of the tools themselves.

4. Enable honest conversations. Encourage a trusting environment where people can discuss what works and what doesn't and admit where parents feel included and where they don't. In this model, we brought in outside innovators whose goal was not to overturn and disrupt but instead to partner, share ideas, show respect, build on strengths, and gain new insights and learnings that they can apply in their own work.

5. Encourage educators to use new family engagement models. Professional learning programs (continuing education as well as degree and certificate programs in higher education) should expose teachers and principals to the elements of design thinking, co-design, empathy interviewing, and cross-sector collaboration. All these ideas can better serve schools and families. Create incentives (such as funds for innovation and opportunities for professional recognition) for educators to get involved in these cross-sector initiatives and bring back ideas to their own schools.

Conclusion

Within just nine months, education leaders were able to connect more deeply with the families in their communities. They designed, built, tested, fixed, and tweaked new communication resources and trust-building programs for their parents and learned from each other. They shared ideas and experiences with experts in the worlds of research, journalism, children's publishing, and tech-based social entrepreneurship. What's more, the fellows in this project had the rare opportunity to visit schools, talk to parents, tackle real-world problems, and gain a deeper understanding of the challenges of keeping schools humming and families happy. This experience doesn't have to be an anomaly. State and local leaders and policymakers can set the conditions for these types of initiatives by creating incentives for educators to get involved in cross-sector collaborations, allowing time to foster relationships and build trust, and setting up systems for listening to what parents want.

Simplifying of the Complexity of the Neurosequential Model – When you understand the why, the "how" reveals itself.

Michelle Maikoetter, MA, NCC, LPC-S; Director of Special Projects Neurosequential Network

Education and social service fields have been built on finding a name for a problem presented to us. It is the natural tendency of our survival driven brain to categorize things to create a greater sense of control. Diagnosing and labeling children releases some responsibility of others to help. Whether it is a DSM diagnosis or a term taken from the social media pop psychology arena, labeling a child may not be that helpful – either to the child or the people needing to provide support. The words tell you a child is struggling with many things (usually sleep, emotional control, attention, impulsivity, and especially relationships). However, when these struggles arise from an adverse developmental history with a lack of buffering relational supports – traditional interventions such as medications, isolation, and punishment may do more to exacerbate these issues than solve them. Relational insults must be healed through relationships, not mere techniques.

Behavioral modification has been a driving force not only in education and parenting but in the workplace as well. Even though much has been written on the negative impact this framework has on motivation, creativity, and continued positive results (please see the work of Deci, Ryan, Kohn and Pink) – we persist in sticking with it. Human behavior is much more complex than we choose to believe. Behavior modification assumes all behavior is conscious and intentional and, therefore, controllable by external forces. Focusing on behaviors and appearances, such as using rewards and punishments to get desired results encourages the development of a false presentation – one of performing rather transforming. In the presence of the reward or punishment, a desired behavior may be achieved. And yet, once that consequence (positive or negative) is removed the prosocial behavior typically ceases. When the goal is limited to short term compliance, what gets lost is long term, internalized, authentic change.

As educational organizations and helpers, we must continually remind ourselves why we exist – to create lasting, intentional change with the children and families we work with. Our desire being that by the time they leave our settings they can be successful beyond the walls of our schools and organizations. Through being good parents, good neighbors, and good friends – they can become relationally rich and contribute to society in many positive ways.

With all the information available to us about brain development and how much we are impacted by our early relationships and experiences, we can no longer allow these antiquated beliefs around behavior and discipline to persist. Moving towards a more thoughtful, individualized methodology calls us to approach education and discipline differently.

Rather than looking at children as broken or merely a label, we need to be more concerned with what they have been through. Many of the behaviors which are termed "challenging" were successful survival responses which now, in a different context, no longer fit the situation. In trying to understand a child's history of experiences and relationships, we can better make sense of what we are seeing and what might be reparative rather than harmful.

If there was an opposite thought to behavior modification, it could be the idea of therapeutic discipline. Discipline is intended to teach a skill or improve a skill. If you augment this with "therapeutic" (anything that maintains or improves wellness and the relationship) then coming up with "consequences" takes on an entirely different function. Asking what a child needs to learn from an incident (such as how to ask for what you want appropriately), makes ideas for punishment such as removing physical activity or social time seem ridiculous.

Underlying this approach is the idea kids do well if they can (Greene, 1998), rather than if they want to. This is a significant shift in how we look at behavior and what needs to happen to address it. With therapeutic discipline, the relationship is more important than anything else – the broken rule or the punishment. Because we know it is the strength of the relationship that will allow long lasting change to occur. (Of course, safety issues remain constant as our primary concern.)

Underlying some of the most challenging behaviors are feelings of separateness, inadequacy, powerlessness, shame, and fear. When our discipline responses increase these feelings rather than address them, we do more harm than good. And, often, increase and/or worsen the very behaviors we are looking to extinguish. This drives a cycle of increased control and isolation which exacerbates the issues again. It is a tiring, exasperating, winless circle – no doubt one we have all been a player (perhaps in either role) in at one time or another.

When Sarah came into our residential education program, she was 14 years old. Having a tumultuous history of domestic violence, alcoholism, homelessness, chaos, and transitions, in an attempt to both escape and to survive Sarah had created quite a fantasy world. Her world included talking about Superman and a vacation she had once experienced which appeared to be much better than it probably was. These were the only topics she was interested in – peers and adults alike. However, with adults who were farther removed from her daily life she would tell extensive stories of abuse with unsettling details.

Sarah's way of relating was not uncommon for a child who had experienced the amount of abuse and neglect she had. Intimate relationships were seen as threatening, strangers were not. She had not done well in school for years, she seemed to not care about grades and rarely attended at all. She was several years behind her grade level. Sarah did not participate in any clubs

or organizations. She was very often alone and appeared to "want it that way."

Sarah's goals at admission into the residential school included, "improve motivation and grades in school, learn to communicate honestly, and learn personal integrity." If we were operating from a traditional discipline system, we may have decided that to "motivate" Sarah (externally), we needed to make her as bored and as uncomfortable as possible. We might think restricting her from activities and peers, and making all these privileges contingent upon improving her grades and attitude would be what she needed. Also, the hope might be that labeling her as depressed or oppositional defiant might help find the right medication regimen to change her behaviors.

However, in looking at her history of relationships and experiences we understood because of our training and utilization of the Neurosequential Model© her brain organization may not be that of a typical 14 year old. Her functional age appeared to be much younger. We could also see how her stories and the ways she interacted with others allowed her to disconnect from her feelings and avoid intimacy.

In order to help Sarah, we took a very holistic approach – utilizing almost every department and role available to us.

After completing an assessment which focused on Sarah's unique history of experiences and relationships – positive and negative, as well as the timing, frequency, and duration of these things while taking into account her current functioning in many different areas (arousal, sleep, appetite, sensory, relational, mood, reward, executive functioning etc.), we were able to create an individualized approach to meet her emotional, social and educational needs. This included an emphasis on sensory processing issues, emotional/physical regulation, and particularly relational engagement.

Educational staff continued to express wanting to know Sarah and spend time with her, but she was allowed to be in control of when she wanted to talk and what she wanted to talk about. Relational regulation was provided by identified staff members greeting her in the morning and walking her to classes and also by having intentional time and space for her during lunch (previously Sarah sat by herself or created issues which may have been an attempt to be "ordered" to eat alone). After a few months of this, Sarah was able to self-regulate for most of the day and only needed a few check-ins. She also gained the ability to ask to go to the counselors' or principal's office when she felt overwhelmed. This was the direct result of safe, predictable relationships being built where she had received enough repetitions to know staff were there to support Sarah – not to punish or shame her.

After seven months of consistent, intentional work we were able to see vast improvements in all areas of Sarah's life. She appeared much more typical both in her appearance and her choice of conversation. She was able to maintain some peer and adult relationships. Her interactions became much more balanced and "real." Sarah progressed so well she was able to return home to live with her mother and to reenter her previous school district.

By meeting her underlying needs through the lens of neurodevelopment and relational health, we were able to extinguish her unacceptable behaviors and increase her personal motivation. After all, motivation is the belief that if we engage in certain behaviors good things will happen. For Sarah, her past had proven there was no need to try because everything was out of her control. Individualizing our approach to her specific needs allowed Sarah's internal scripts of people and the world to be rewritten. In this way, we were able to change her future trajectory which extends beyond the walls of our school for years to come.

In this talk, the Neurosequential Model© will be introduced and the core concepts relating to clinical, educational, and coaching settings will be discussed. Mental health interventions are often dismissed as being "too complex" and/or "taking too much time". By understanding what is behind many behavioral challenges, we are better able to adequately address them in a developmentally sensitive and sequential way – creating better opportunities for efficiency and success.

For a deeper dive into the Neurosequential Model©: *https://www.neurosequential.com/global-support*

CET/ThinkTV Education (PBS - there are a few videos): *https://www.pbs.org/video/episode-1-the-neurosequential-model-5prebi/*

Seven Slide Series: *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uOsgDkeH52o&t=290s*

Free book study guide on the front page of our website: *https://www.neurosequential.com/*

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Section 3

The Learning Experience

Oklahoma's Education Overhaul: What's Changing in Schools Next Year

Jennifer Palmer, Oklahoma Watch, May 13, 2026

Decisions made at 23rd and Lincoln brought a cascade of changes to Coyle Public Schools, about 40 miles north.

This year, students in Coyle attended class in person Monday through Thursday, and studied online every Friday until spring break, when Fridays became part of the weekend. Teachers still met at school for professional development and collaboration on some Fridays. Student athletes attended games and track meets without missing lessons.

Ninety-three percent of the families surveyed supported the schedule, Superintendent Colby Cagle said. But to comply with new laws from the state legislature, Coyle schools' calendar for next year includes 173 school days, all in person. It'll cost about $128,000 more to operate the district, and necessitate a number of other adjustments, Cagle said.

"We're not happy about the change, but we're going to embrace it and we're going to make the best out of it," he said.

Hundreds of school districts across the state will find similar changes necessary as a 2025 law cracking down on virtual days and a 2026 law lengthening the minimum school year take effect.

As the Legislature prepares to adjourn for the year, Oklahoma Watch looked at some of the most consequential changes coming to public schools.

Pay, Funding and Choices

Senate Bill 201 raised minimum teacher compensation by $2,000 at each level of experience and education. It goes into effect in the 2026-27 school year. Starting teachers with a bachelor's degree would earn at least $41,601 in combined salary and benefits, up from $39,601.

Legislators increased the cap for the Parental Choice Tax Credit by $25 million with House Bill 3705. Starting in fiscal year 2027, the total amount of available credits is $275 million. The program, a major initiative for the Legislature and Governor Kevin Stitt in 2023, offers families a refundable tax credit of $5,000 to $7,500 for private school tuition and fees. Though it's called a refundable tax credit, it functions like a voucher because families can advance the funds from the Oklahoma Tax Commission in a process that's separate from income tax filing. One in five recipients, or 21%, reported household income of more than $250,000 a year, significantly higher than the state's median income of $65,039, and many had students already attending private schools.

Early Childhood Literacy

The legislature and the governor prioritized reading reforms this session, and the result was Senate Bill 1778, which amends the Strong Readers Act. The provisions begin in the 2027-28 school year. The bill requires third graders to score basic or

Oklahoma Watch
No Favorites No Falsehoods No Fear



Warner middle school students spend their spare time after lunch outside chatting or playing sports. (Rip Stell/For Oklahoma Watch)

above on the statewide reading test, or earn an acceptable score on an alternative test, or qualify for a good-cause exemption, to move on to fourth grade. Those who can't will repeat third grade.

The retention provision could have a significant impact on students, families and schools. Oklahoma Department of Education data shows 21,300 third graders, or 43% of those tested, in 2024-25 failed to meet the test score required and would have been retained unless they qualified for a limited exception.

The legislation also requires schools to give second graders the third-grade reading test, but parents can opt out. And it codifies additional reading interventions schools must employ in state law.

The bill is a mixed bag, with some good components and some that are worrisome, said Erin Brewer, chair of the Democratic Party.

"I really do like the early intervention work and the extra funding for training around literacy and literacy tutoring," she said. "I'm really concerned around strictness on retention. I think

that can really be damaging to kids over the long run."

Longer School Recess

Under Senate Bill 1481, schools must provide students in kindergarten through 5th grades 40 minutes of recess per day. Recess can be divided into two 20-minute periods, but it must be supervised, unstructured time for play. Schools can't withhold recess for discipline. The policy takes effect in the 2026-27 school year. A related proposal to increase the minimum time for P.E. in schools, from 60 minutes to 150 minutes per week, stalled in the Senate and did not become law.

School Calendars

The Legislature took a step toward lengthening the school year in most districts with House Bill 3151. State law requires schools to be in session at least 181 days each year, but schools that adopt a longer school day can utilize a shorter year and count class time by hours. The new law requires those school districts to be in session a minimum of 173 days, up from 166. The minimum of 1,086 hours remained the same. It takes effect in 2027 but only if the Legislature that year appropriates at least an additional $175 million to the Oklahoma Department of Education.

"The more time our students can get in front of a high-quality teacher, the better," said Shawn Hime, executive director of the Oklahoma State School Boards Association, which supported the bill.

Schools' ability to count hours, instead of days, came after a powerful ice storm in 2010 that shuttered schools for over a week. By 2025, nearly all school districts used the provision to meet fewer than 181 days, Department of Education data shows.

Related legislation approved in 2025 virtually eliminates online school days in traditional school districts. Only two are allowed per year, and only if the governor declares a state of emergency or proclamation and the school district already has an approved plan to provide virtual instruction. That bill goes into effect in the 2026-27 school year. Statewide virtual charter schools and full-time virtual education programs operated by school districts are exempt.

Student Cell Phones

House Bill 1276 extends the bell-to-bell student cellphone ban implemented last year. The 2025 legislation required only a one-year ban, but lawmakers this year made it permanent. The law bars students from using cellphones or smartwatches during school hours except in an emergency. Students who use smart devices to monitor health conditions also have an exception.



"My 'what I did over summer vacation' report is a short one. I stared at my phone. The end."

CartoonStock.com

Preparing Students to Navigate an Unknown Future

Jennifer McGrail, Founder & Managing Partner, McGrail Strategic Partners

The high school Class of 2026 is entering a workforce where drone pilot, AI prompt engineer, and unmanned traffic controller are ordinary job listings. When these same students were seven years old, in 2017, almost none of those jobs existed. That detail matters more than it first appears. When researchers at University College London (UCL) asked more than 20,000 children to draw the job they wanted as adults, they found that career aspirations formed by age seven had barely changed by seventeen.[1] More than a third were based on someone the child personally knew. Fewer than one percent had learned about a job from a person from the working world visiting their school.

Children choose from the careers they can see.

The Class of 2026 built its dreams from the 2017 job market. Their younger siblings are building theirs from today's. Somewhere in an Oklahoma elementary school this morning, a seven-year-old is quietly deciding what is possible.

What Are We Really Preparing Students For

We often hear that education should prepare students for the workforce. The phrase has become so common we rarely stop to question it. It assumes we know what workforce we are preparing students to enter.

The truth is we most likely do not know what job market today's fourth graders will enter or even create. IBM estimates the half-life of a technical skill at three to five years.[2] The World Economic Forum projects that 170 million new roles will be created and 92 million displaced worldwide by 2030, and that 39 percent of the core skills workers rely on will change in that same window.[3] Curiosity and lifelong learning rank among the capabilities rising fastest in value.

My personal experience in supporting innovation here in Oklahoma has me increasingly convinced that "workforce pipeline" is no longer the right metaphor. Pipelines assume a fixed destination. Today's students will enter careers that shift repeatedly over their lives, and if we do our jobs well, many will create opportunities that do not yet exist. In my years leading Oklahoma's technology-based economic development efforts, I watched innovation economies rise or fall on the success of five elements: a research base that generates new knowledge, mechanisms for moving that knowledge to market, an entrepreneurial culture, sources of risk capital, and a technically skilled workforce.[4] Education policy usually connects schools to the fifth element alone. That sells education short and in turn our students short. Tomorrow's research base is sitting in a fourth-grade classroom right now. Schools build the fire of an entrepreneurial culture, or quietly extinguish it, through how they treat experimentation and failure. Oklahoma needs a system that develops workforce skills and innovation capacity together, with room for students to reach both by different routes.

Exploratory Capital

In economic development, we measure everything in "capital." Does a region have the research capital to generate ideas, the risk capital to fund them, the human capital to build them? Years of asking those questions convinced me that education has a form of capital we are not measuring or much less paying attention to at all.

Researchers at UCL found a clue while studying why some young people pursue science and others never consider it. They called it "science capital." Something as simple as knowing one person who works in science strongly predicts whether a student follows that path.[5] The deciding factor was not curriculum, aptitude or interest, it was access.
STEM skills and this science capital will undoubtedly be a significant conversation during the Town Hall. I will encourage us to think even broader. Our students will need exploratory capital to achieve their full potential in the future. They will need structured and unstructured opportunities to encounter people, technologies, workplaces, and ideas beyond their current immediate surroundings, including fields that do not yet have names. Exploratory capital will be the thread that ties the pieces together. The seven-year-old drawing her future can only draw what she has seen. An innovative economy can only renew itself with people who imagined their way into it.

Does exposure really change outcomes? The evidence says yes. Young adults who recalled four or more employer engagement activities during school were five times less likely to end up outside education and employment, and they earned 16 percent more than peers who recalled none.[6] Students who heard career talks from employers at fourteen and fifteen showed a measurable wage premium a decade later.[7] Researchers attribute these gains to expanded networks and career knowledge rather than job skills. The catch is that one-time efforts do not last. The benefits of a single exposure fade within months.[8] Exposure pays off when it happens again and again, beginning well before high school.

The encouraging news is that any community can build exploratory capital on purpose. A student gains it when an engineer visits her classroom, when a school puts a nearby employer on the field trip calendar, when a local professional agrees to mentor, or when a virtual job shadow connects a small-town student to an industry three counties away. None of this requires a new agency or a large appropriation. It requires intention and community support.

Borrow Principles, Not Programs

Looking internationally reminds us that there is no single blueprint for success. Germany integrates apprenticeship into secondary education itself. Switzerland lets students move freely between vocational and academic pathways through-

out life, and roughly 70 percent of its young people choose the vocational route.[9] Singapore assumes education never truly ends, giving every adult a funded learning account and income support during retraining. More than 36,000 mid-career workers used its mid-career top-up in the first year.[10] The United States has proven models of its own. Career Academies, small high school programs pairing academics with a career theme and employer partnerships, produced graduates earning $174 more per month in a randomized trial, sustained over eight years.[11]

The lesson is not that Oklahoma should import another country's education system. Colorado's attempt to replicate the Swiss apprenticeship model demonstrates how difficult direct transplantation can be.[12] To be successful, we must intentionally find the principles that reflect culture, geography, economies, and history.

Through all of these examples, several commonalities emerge. First is that students experience repeated exposure to the world beyond school. Additionally, learning is connected to authentic work. Most importantly, learners are never locked into a single path or destination and all paths and destinations are shown equal value. Oklahoma should embrace these same principles while building a model uniquely suited to our own communities.

Oklahoma's Opportunity

Exploratory capital varies by geography as much as by income, and Oklahoma geography provides our competitive advantage. We are one of twelve states where at least half of public schools are rural, and our rural districts rank among the most racially diverse in the nation.[13] Rural students graduate at higher rates than their peers. Their schools rank among the most equitable in the country. The same schools are far less likely to offer advanced coursework, internships, or contact with emerging industries.[14] Students in our urban cores face problems as well, inlcuing proximity to industry without connection to it.

Another possible usable competitive advantage belongs to Oklahoma as well. Our emerging innovation frontier is often rural. The Skyway Range drone corridor crosses Osage County.[15] One of the world's largest data centers sits in Mayes County, where MidAmerica Industrial Park has invested more than $2.5 million in STEM programs across 18 rural school districts, connecting students to robotics, aerospace, coding, and the employers on site, including Google.[16] Oklahoma already has statutes in place so that every Oklahoma student builds an Individual Career Academic Plan, a statewide structure that could carry exploration far beyond its current scope.[17]

Some incredible pieces already exist. Now we need to create a better system for every student in every community.

The Question We Ask Too Late

Oklahoma often asks how we keep our best students from leaving the state. We rarely ask whether they ever discovered the opportunities already here. Students seldom pursue careers they have never seen, industries they have never encountered, or futures they cannot imagine. Expanding exploratory capital may be one of the most important educational investments Oklahoma can make.

The questions I hope this Town Hall will wrestle with are these:

- **Exposure:** How do we ensure every student, rural or urban, regularly encounters the technologies and people reshaping Oklahoma's future?
- **Durable Skills:** How do we cultivate curiosity and capabilities that outlast any single technology?
- **Lifelong Learning:** How do we build the culture, and the structures, for learning that continues throughout life?

Oklahoma has the opportunity to design an education system that prepares learners not simply for the jobs of today, but for a lifetime of discovery, adaptation, and contribution. In a future where technologies and industries will keep evolving, the most valuable outcome education can provide is the confidence and capability to keep learning.

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"If you're preparing us for the real world, does that mean this is all make believe?"

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Preparing Students for a World That No Longer Exists

Courtney Scott, M.Ed., Chief Communications Officer, Norman Public Schools

Reimagining Public Education in Oklahoma

Every generation builds schools for the world it knows. The challenge facing Oklahoma today is that the world our schools were designed for no longer exists.

Students are growing up in an era defined by artificial intelligence, constant digital connection, rising mental health needs, rapidly changing careers, and information that moves faster than ever before. Yet much of our education system—and many of our public debates—still treats these issues as separate problems with separate solutions.

They are not separate. They are interconnected realities that demand a different way of thinking about public education. If Oklahoma is serious about preparing students for the future, we must stop viewing literacy, technology, student behavior, mental health, and workforce readiness as competing priorities. They are parts of the same system, and our policies should reflect that reality.

Literacy Must Remain Our Foundation

No educational priority is more important than ensuring every child learns to read proficiently, as reading is the gateway to every other subject and is a strong predictor of long-term educational and economic success. Students who struggle with literacy face challenges also tend to struggle in science, mathematics, social studies, and eventually the workforce.

Oklahoma has recognized this challenge and has made literacy a statewide priority through renewed emphasis on evidence-based reading instruction, intervention systems, and implementation of the Science of Reading. Efforts to replicate the remarkable gains seen in Mississippi demonstrate an encouraging shift toward using research to drive instructional practice rather than relying on tradition alone.

However, improving literacy requires much more than adopting a new curriculum. High-performing school systems increasingly use universal screening, instructional coaching, frequent progress monitoring, and collaborative problem-solving to ensure students receive support before they fall significantly behind. Literacy is no longer viewed as the responsibility of individual teachers alone; it has become an organizational priority supported through strategic planning, continuous improvement, and data-informed decision making. This approach represents an important evolution in public education.

Technology Changed Childhood Faster Than Schools Could Adapt

Today's students have never known a world without smartphones, instant information, and constant digital connection. Technology has created extraordinary opportunities, as students can collaborate across continents, access information instantly, personalize learning, and explore careers that did not exist a generation ago.

At the same time, technology presents challenges that educators and families continue to navigate together. Attention spans compete with endless digital distractions. Students must learn to distinguish credible information from misinformation. Face-to-face communication competes with digital interaction. Families and schools alike are working to establish healthy boundaries around technology use while recognizing its educational value.

The conversation should not be about if technology belongs in schools. Rather, it should focus on helping students develop the judgment, self-regulation, and digital citizenship necessary to use technology responsibly.

Digital literacy in today's world includes evaluating sources, recognizing misinformation, managing distractions, protecting privacy, and communicating responsibly online. These are no longer optional skills—they are essential competencies for citizenship and employment.

Technology itself is neither the problem nor the solution. Like every educational tool before it, its effectiveness depends upon thoughtful implementation.

Artificial Intelligence Changes What Students Need to Learn

Artificial intelligence has accelerated this conversation even further. Much of today's discussion centers on preventing students from using AI. While academic integrity remains critically important, that conversation alone misses the larger opportunity.

The more important question is, "What knowledge and skills become even more valuable in a world where artificial intelligence exists?" If AI can generate information in seconds, write full-bodied essays, and automate routine tasks, then students must become exceptional evaluators of information, critical thinkers and creative but ethical problem solvers.

Artificial intelligence will not, and should not, replace professional educators. However, it has the potential to strengthen public education by reducing administrative burdens, improving communication, identifying trends within complex data, and expanding access to information for students, families, and employees. Innovative school systems are already using AI in these ways while maintaining that human relationships remain at the center of education.

The schools that thrive will not compete with AI, but instead will teach students how to effectively work alongside it.

Student Well-Being Is Not Separate from Academic Achievement

One of the most significant shifts in education over the past decade has been recognizing that learning cannot be separated from student well-being. Educators today serve students whose experiences increasingly include anxiety, depression, trauma, social isolation, and other challenges that directly affect learning.

These realities do not replace schools' academic mission—they shape students' ability to benefit from it.When students feel physically safe, emotionally supported, and connected to trusted adults, they are better prepared to engage in learning, build relationships, and develop resilience.

Across Oklahoma, schools are expanding partnerships with mental health providers, strengthening early intervention systems, and integrating academic, behavioral, social-emotional, and mental health supports into coordinated frameworks rather than isolated programs. This represents an important philosophical shift. Supporting the whole child is not a distraction from academic excellence. It is one of the conditions necessary to achieve it.

Behavior Reflects More Than Discipline

Student behavior is often treated as a discipline problem. Increasingly, schools recognize that behavioral issues are learning problems as well, and positive behavior is built through relationships, consistent expectations, early intervention, and coordinated support systems.

Educators are implementing restorative practices, behavioral screening, threat assessment processes, and multi-tiered systems of support that seek to understand the causes of behavior while maintaining safe learning environments.

These approaches emphasize accountability alongside skill development and relationship building. This is not about lowering expectations. It is about recognizing that lasting behavioral change requires more than punishment alone.

The Opportunity Before Oklahoma

Public education is often described through the lens of its challenges. Yet this moment presents one of the greatest opportunities our state has experienced in decades. Oklahoma has an opportunity to rethink education not as a collection of disconnected initiatives but as an integrated system designed around student success.

Imagine an Oklahoma where every child becomes a confident reader, every classroom uses technology intentionally, artificial intelligence expands learning rather than replacing it, mental health support is available before students reach crisis, and schools work alongside families, businesses, and community organizations to prepare students for their future—not just tests.

Many Oklahoma schools are already moving in this direction through strategic planning, continuous improvement, stronger community partnerships, and evidence-based practices that align academics with student well-being. The work is challenging. It requires collaboration across education, government, healthcare, higher education, business, and families. But preparing students for tomorrow demands nothing less.

One Recommendation

Imagine an Oklahoma where every child becomes a confident reader, every classroom uses technology intentionally, artificial intelligence expands learning rather than replacing it, mental health support is available before students reach crisis, and schools work alongside families, businesses, and community organizations to prepare students for lives—not just tests.

To achieve this, we must move beyond isolated educational initiatives and adopt a statewide framework that intentionally integrates literacy, technology, mental health, behavior, workforce readiness, and community partnerships into one coordinated system of student support.

For too long, education policy has treated these priorities as separate conversations.
Students do not experience them separately. Neither should schools. Preparing students for an uncertain future will require more than improving test scores or adopting the newest technology. It will require building educational systems that recognize the complexity of childhood while remaining relentlessly focused on academic excellence.

The future of Oklahoma depends not only on how well our students can read, calculate, or use technology. It depends on whether we prepare them to think critically, solve problems ethically, build meaningful relationships, adapt to change, and continue learning throughout their lives. That is the enduring purpose of public education.

Why Is Education So Damn Fad-Prone?

Robert Pondiscio, American Enterprise Institute, April 2, 2026

Every few years, education seems to discover something new that will finally fix schools—a new framework, a new approach, a new way of thinking about teaching and learning. It arrives with urgency and conviction, spreads quickly, reshapes professional development and classroom practice, and then fades away, either replaced by the shiny new thing or layered on top of it. Twenty-first century skills, trauma-informed pedagogy, flipped classrooms, 1:1 devices—all promised to succeed where the last one fell short.

Ask a veteran teacher to list the major instructional initiatives they've been trained on over the past decade and you're likely to get a weary laugh before you get an answer. Discipline systems cycle from zero tolerance to restorative practices; "data-driven instruction" yields to "personalized learning," which is now being rebranded yet again in the age of AI. Each shift arrives with urgency and moral clarity. Each requires retraining, new materials, and a reorientation of practice. Spend enough time in schools and the pattern becomes impossible to ignore. Which raises an uncomfortable question:

Why is education so damn fad-prone?

The easy answer is also the most insulting—that educators are uniquely susceptible to trends, quick to abandon what works, and too eager to embrace whatever comes next. But that answer is wrong. Classroom teachers are typically the least enthusiastic participants in these cycles, having learned through experience how quickly today's "transformational" idea becomes tomorrow's abandoned initiative.

Education isn't fad-driven because the people in it lack judgment. It's fad-driven because the system they work in makes churn not just common, but rational. Four structural forces, in particular, push schools toward constant reinvention:

1) Weak feedback loops. In most sectors, failure reveals itself quickly. Customers leave, revenue falls, and performance problems become unmistakable. In education, by contrast, the signal is slow and noisy. Instructional changes may take years to show results. Student cohorts turn over annually. Outcomes depend on factors well beyond the classroom, such as attendance, family circumstances, peer effects, and more. Even when results improve or decline, attribution is murky. There are too many moving parts to say with reasonable certainty that any single input was determinative. Under these conditions, it's impossible to offer decisive proof that a given approach is or isn't working. This makes education unusually vulnerable not just to bad ideas, but to the premature abandonment of good ones.

2) Leadership legitimacy requires visible change. School systems churn through leaders with striking regularity. Superintendents, principals, and state chiefs shouldn't buy green bananas. The onus is on each new leader to demonstrate that he or she is, in fact, leading. Many will come to the unfortunate conclusion that leadership is signaled not through stewardship, but through action: launching initiatives, unveiling strategic plans, introducing new frameworks, reorganizing priorities. Anyone who has spent time around school systems has seen the pattern: A new leader arrives, announces a bold vision, rebrands existing efforts, and introduces a new set of priorities. Three years later, often before results are fully visible, that leader departs (school superintendents tend to last a single contract cycle) and the wheel turns another revolution. A leader who says, "We're going to keep doing what we're doing, but do it better," risks appearing passive or directionless, even if the system is performing well. It is a structural expectation. In education, visible change is how leadership signals its worth.

3) Low barriers to new ideas. In fields like medicine or engineering, new approaches must pass through layers of validation before they reach widespread adoption. Education has far fewer guardrails. A new framework can be published, marketed, and adopted by districts in rapid succession. Professional development cycles spread new ideas quickly, consultants package innovations into turnkey programs, and procurement systems often treat instructional approaches as interchangeable. The result is a highly permeable system—one in which ideas can enter and scale rapidly, often long before their effectiveness is firmly established.

4) Moral urgency. Education is not a typical service sector. It concerns children's lives and futures, and that reality creates a constant sense of moral urgency. If a proposal claims it might help struggling students succeed—especially disadvantaged students—the pressure to act is immense. Waiting for perfect evidence can feel ethically unacceptable; trying something new, even with incomplete proof, feels compassionate. This isn't foolish or irresponsible. It's what happens when moral responsibility collides with uncertainty. But it creates a powerful bias toward action—and,

by extension, toward constant change.

Taken together, these forces produce a system in which reform cycles are not accidental but predictable. Slow, ambiguous evidence makes it hard to know what is working. Leadership incentives reward visible change. New ideas face little resistance to adoption. Moral urgency pushes systems to act rather than wait. Under those conditions, stability is not the natural condition. Change is. Indeed, stability can easily be mistaken—and often is—for complacency or indifference.

The problem is not that education experiments with new ideas. Some experimentation is necessary and healthy. The problem is that the system struggles to sustain success once it finds it. Schools that improve often do so through unglamorous means: adopting a coherent curriculum, building teacher expertise, reinforcing consistent instructional routines, and maintaining focus over time. None of this is flashy. None of it lends itself to prizes or glowing media profiles. And all of it is fragile.

Recent reforms in Houston's schools offer a useful contrast. Rather than chasing novelty, the district has focused on something far less glamorous: tightly specified lessons, routine checks for understanding, and instructional systems designed for the teachers schools actually have—not the ones reformers wish they had. Whatever one thinks of the model (and its critics are many and voluble) its premise runs against the grain of the broader system: Improvement comes not from constant reinvention, but from disciplined execution.

A change in leadership, a shift in priorities, or the arrival of a "promising" new approach can disrupt years of accumulated progress. Elsewhere, I've argued that the real miracle in education is not that some schools succeed. It's that any manage to keep succeeding. The four factors enumerated above help explain why.

If we want to break the cycle, the solution is not to scold educators for chasing new ideas. It is to realign incentives so that stability and execution are valued as forms of leadership. That means treating implementation fidelity as an achievement, not an afterthought, and creating political and institutional cover for leaders who choose continuity over novelty. It means building systems that measure and reward long-term improvement, not short-term activity, and elevating professional norms that prize mastery over constant reinvention.

In short, we need to make competence visible. Because until we do, the system will continue to reward the appearance of change over the reality of improvement. So yes, education is fad-prone. Just not for the reasons we usually assume. We don't chase reform because we forget what works. We chase reform because the system makes standing still look irresponsible—even when standing still is exactly what success requires.

The Worker as Citizen, or Vice Versa?

John H. Feaver, Ph.D., President Emeritus,University of Science & Arts of Oklahoma

While the Oklahoma Academy's Town Hall process has targeted significant education issues in past years, its 2026 focus on our PK-12 system of schools comes at a time in the nation's history when our effective acquisition and creative use of accurate data, information, and knowledge must exist as the indispensable vehicle for securing our best future.

Adding to the socialization process provided by family and society-at-large, primary and secondary education concentrates throughout in assisting the acquisition of primary skills such as reading, writing, numbers, the importance of social and legal collaboration and concerns, and so forth. It also serves the labor and professional needs of business and industry and workforce development by encouraging skill development tied to jobs, careers, and professions.

All of this raises questions about the structure and content of the PK-12 curriculum. While the essentials of both are certainly relevant to the thoughts of this essay, our more primary concern will remain more on the question of PK-12 learning outcomes.

To facilitate our discussion, it might be useful to distinguish between education and training. Though the two are frequently used interchangeably, they are not precisely the same thing. Training is used here to refer to the acquisition of those skill sets necessary to perform effectively in a particular job, career, or profession.

Present national discussions on the value of education are born of a forceful blend of workforce development priorities centering on the notion that the value of the educational enterprise is important primarily to the extent that it serves the needs of business and industry; that the cost of education can best be justified if successfully tied to a post-graduate job or career that involves an adequate financial return on the investment in skill development. One author refers to this overweaning workforce development emphasis as a prime example of the "vulgarities of the marketplace".

While the competitive marketplace most certainly does offer an avalanche of vulgarities, this essay is not intended as an attack on Madison Avenue's frequent lack of good taste, the priorities of workforce development, or the needs of business and industry. Quite the opposite. The economic health of the nation does require that we increase our science, technology, engineering and math graduates, those most closely tied to workforce development priorities.

Rather, my concern is the dysfunctional non sequitur involved in arguing the case for needing more STEM graduates and then, presume as a complimentary logical line of argument, to diminish the value of those realms of knowledge that do not appear immediately relevant to workforce development or to the skill requirements connected to jobs, careers and professions.

This duality involved in our thinking about the content of learning as it relates both to an effectively functioning economy and otherwise to human behavior and welfare generally, has floated around our national culture since the late 18th century when the original thirteen Atlantic coast colonies rebelled against the authority of England and rule by a monarchy (actually Parliament).

Our Declaration of Independence resulted in replacing English authority with a Republican form of government. The latter was specifically committed to provide "freemen" (socially and economically privileged white male elites) the means and responsibilities of self-government. Instead of political authority presumably inherited by a select hereditary elite, power would now be vested in and shared through the people. As freemen and voting citizens, they would staff a Republican government with officials of their own choosing; all this subject to continuity or change based on their approval.

A most radical idea at the time, its American origins reflected several sources. Most involved in leading the revolt were well educated in contemporary European 18th century Enlightenment thought. Deism, a central component in this thinking, assumed the existence of God and God's creation of the universe to include all of earthly existence. While the Almighty remained interested in what was happening on earth, God did not interfere with its operation. Like a wound-up clock, the world ran on its own energy. Ultimately, however, it was subject to human's rational understanding of its mechanics.

It was a direct challenge to older theistic "divine right of kings" argument about authority and control "naturally" vested in a king and aristocracy and flowing top down. Distance from Europe and a vast North American geographic interior inevitably reenforced Deist thinking on this side of the Atlantic. Even before the end of the War for Independence, a rising flow of immigrants was moving west across the Appalachian Mountains looking for opportunities and rewards. Testy about excessive interference in their frontier affairs even by colonial governments back east, free enterprise notions about the best government governing least were increasingly popular. Members of the business community who were angry at British imposition of unwanted taxes and perceived constraints on economic opportunities and profits could not have agreed more.

The American religious philosopher Jonathan Edwards provided powerfully supporting theological reinforcement. He taught that God's very nature was neither static nor immutable, but with wisdom and grace, creatively evolved over time. In sum, it seemed self-evident to the American revo-

lutionaries that the time and circumstances of this world's evolving nature had rendered the historic value of the monarchy's social and political order obsolete.

From the very beginning of United States history, independence meant that the people (voting citizens) would have the collective authority to manage their own economy, their own social and political systems, their own legal jurisdictions, as well as managing themselves as "freemen". And it seemed clear to them that God was on board with all this.

It was from this broad matrix of citizen responsibilities assigned to a voting public of freemen that you see the seeds of duality concerning proper realms of learning necessary for managing and staffing the country's economy and its operational needs otherwise. Irrespective, it was the overarching belief of the Founders that a Republican government's decision-making processes would not function properly without an educated population and the means to achieve it. Even before the American revolt, the idea of the importance of public education with a purpose was already beginning to emerge in colonial thinking.

It was the massive movement of Euro-American immigration and population growth across the Appalachians and the prospect of new states forming in the North American interior that encouraged creation of formal mechanisms for funding public education. A series of laws surveying new territories in the 1780's, Northwest Ordinance(s), established the pattern of federal land policies that largely remain today. Land would be divided into six-mile square townships, each township into 36 sections, each section one mile square containing 640 acres. Section 16 within each township would be open to land sales with collections reserved for investing in public education.

When the population of a territory reached 60,000, it could make formal application to apply as a state to the federal union.

Early education in the colonies was based on private giving, investment from benevolent groups, and involved fees to attend. New England was earliest in experimenting with primary and secondary models; a few "colleges" were earliest in the southern colonies. However, with the Northwest Ordinance(s) and a funding mechanism for schools in place, the greatest social gain in the years 1820-1850 was in the realm of public education. By mid-century the basic system principles for public education in this country were set: free primary and secondary schools for all children; a grading system for students, grades 1-12; all children should be required to attend (public or private) up to a certain age; and teachers should be given some professional training.

The newly independent country found itself fully preoccupied with expanding west across the North American continent throughout the remainder of the 18th and 19th centuries. Interrupted by a devastating civil war in the early 1860's, expansion resumed beyond the Mississippi to the west coast and across the Pacific to East Asia.

It was a process fueled by the idea of "Manisfest Destiny".

Emerging in the early years of the 19th Century, it proclaimed the new nation's God-given right at least to occupy and control all lands west located between a preponderant British presence in Canada and the Spanish in Mexico. By the end of that century, the United States had acquired full hegemony in the western hemisphere and emerging powerful status both as an economic behemoth and an increasingly important player in world affairs.

The turn of the 20th century proved a major point of transition in the life of the American Republic. Recognized and celebrated across the nation at the time, it was forcefully implied in the 1893 publication of Frederick Johnson Turner's famous thesis, The Significance of the American Frontier in American History.

In Turner's view, it was the historic experience of Europeans arriving in the wilderness of the Western Hemisphere and their gradual spread across the North American frontier that had shaped the essential features of the American character. It was the availability of free land and the wealth of its development that attracted sustained immigration and the emergence of an American character – a roughhewn personality plainspoken in its dealings; an individualism near selfishness; and an intolerance of any undue interference in pursuit of riches. While government might be necessary to counter the centrifugal tendencies of an extremely self-centered folk as well as to protect the fruits of their labor, it should be minimally intrusive in affecting individual initiative otherwise.

However useful in explaining the causative relationship of a people working through the challenges of the frontier's physical environment and the emergence of a distinctive national character, Turner did little to illuminate those larger forces that brought the historic circumstances of the American frontier to an end. It was the growing power of business and industry, initially in transportation (railroads) and communications (telegraph), which not only ended its inhibiting features of distance and isolation but as well produced an expanding commercial network to serve the market needs of the frontier's advancing rural – agricultural settlement.

These same forces, moreover, reflected the nation's more general transformation away from its rural – agricultural antecedents in creating a new frontier, a rapidly expanding urban – industrial economy and society.

In this early 20th century context, it was no mere coincidence there emerged great debate across the nation about its system of public education, one built around the social, political and economic priorities of America's predominantly rural past. Was it now up to the task of successfully addressing the problems and challenges of the modern world; the changes and effects of its growing cities; the impact of corporate power and influence on the democratic processes of government; on the prospects for equal opportunity in competing for success; on labor's factory working conditions?

Leading the discussion was my philosopher teacher friend, John Dewey, arguably the most influential thinker on education in the 20th century. He was born two years before the American Civil War and directly experienced the path of the country's changing character until near his death in the year before Dwight Eisenhower became president. Throughout the period of his life and the nation's history, he was broadly interested in studying and commenting on the relationship between education and democracy and especially the question of what and how was the best way for human beings and social groups to effectively learn and succeed in a world characterized by constant change.

He was exceedingly unhappy with the state of public education at the time. He decried its "curriculum-centered" preoccupations which treated the child as though an empty receptacle primed passively to absorb little more than the priorities of civilization past and about the conformist needs and expectations of existing society. He was critical of its emphasis on memorization and reciting of facts and figures; on simply mastering not questioning the learning demands of the curriculum; and on a system of rewards for success and punishment for failure to learn. He even complained about the implicit and stifling order and discipline reflected in a classroom's space of arranged and ordered rows of chairs facing authority positioned at the front.

As the alternative, Dewey argued a more "child-centered" approach to education. Even though each student was different in terms of historic background and learning potential, he believed all were active and creative beings. Instead of indoctrination, it was critically important to liberate the child's inherent curiosity and desire to explore by posing problems that challenged them to learn by doing; a situation in which the teacher would present real world problems to the children and then assist their efforts to solve the problem by providing hands-on activity to arrive at a solution. Most importantly, he believed it was imperative to arm the public school graduate with a body of information and the skills that would allow each to achieve their personal goals and ambitions in a constantly changing world.

Though Dewey's educational concern was development of a self-reliant individual, he also understood that human beings were social animals and in the U.S. that meant collaborating through the processes of a democratic form of government. He was clear that it was the best type of social and political arrangement for both the individual and the group to achieve their goals in a rapidly changing world.

Dewey argued that the operational structure of a democracy required free and open access of its citizenry to education and knowledge. He believed that a society of informed and engaged inquirers was the best means for promoting human interests. He believed that those educated and who understood the changing world in which they lived would be those most likely to be active citizens; to be interested in helping to shape a better world.

He decried authoritarian political and social systems that ordered their populations into roles confined to proscribed areas of endeavor. It robbed them of a sense of the value of both personal freedom and assuming responsibility for the safety and welfare for others in the community.

He also railed against trade vocationalism by which he meant a narrow training that merely served the corporate interests of business and industry by channeling individuals into jobs in which, without the knowledge to escape, they might be trapped for life. A couple of quotes from Dewey display the logic of his argument and its useful relevance to our discussion of the PK-12 system's teaching-learning priorities and objectives. In conjunction with his view that in a rapidly changing world, educated and informed citizens in a democratic society were the best means for promoting both individual and collective human interests, he wrote:

"The challenge of human life is to determine how to live well with the processes of change, not somehow to transcend them";

"Human knowledge is wholly intertwined with precarious, constantly changing nature";

"With an appropriate knowledge of the conditions for human growth, the individual may develop in any of a variety of ways."

Hope and aspiration for Dewey was not success in achieving some immutable or ultimate end, but rather confined to this world centered on using the capacity of human reason to learn from the constantly changing nature of reality. Thus, he taught that life's top educational priority was to commit to intellectual and moral growth (the two synonymous in his thinking) making sure specifically not to settle for some life or work option, "as though once and for all at some particular time in history."

The last half of Dewey's life only reinforced his seminal views on the relationship between education, learning, democracy and change. He experienced two world wars and a Great Depression. Though he did not live to see its magnitude, already the early vestiges of an Information Economy were beginning to influence and modify the nature of its urban – industrial predecessor.

Dewey would have been fascinated and keenly interested by the energy and nature of the Information Economy and not terribly surprised that his philosophic constructs nicely anticipated its operational mechanics. Invaded by the informational platforms of the Internet with its multiple services and ever-expanding universe of information and knowledge available for retrieval and use-on-demand, its evolution derived from a continuous configuration and reconfiguration of information for the purpose of driving invention and innovation.

However, what the general contours of Turner's and especially Dewey's thinking did at the time was not only to provide a packaged explanation of why the nation has been

so successful in the course of its history, but also offered an understandable guide for moving forward into the new but as yet unknown frontier of an urban – industrial America. With an end to the physical frontier and its historic process of transforming a "wilderness" into successful settlement and nation building, what the country needed going forward was the theoretical and operational means for transcending the existing limits of human knowledge and through education guard against impediments to the future growth of a democratic society.

The content of these early 20th century conversations about our nation's system of public schools ranged across issues and questions that still resonate today. They continue to surround the priorities and operations of our PK-12 classrooms that remain significantly modeled on this debate. And, it is John Dewey's continuing influence on our thinking about education which continues to fuel this conversation; his sense of the relationship between learning and the constant dynamic of change; his belief that the opportunities of learning should be open to all children; and his central confidence that a democratic system was the clearly superior way to reconcile a wide diversity of human interests.

There were domestic threats to democracy. With a major stake in the character of existing society, "reactionary" forces, "parasites", were always ready to pressure the schools to teach and graduate obedient and compliant individuals who, without serious question, would accept existing distributions of social and political privilege not reflecting their interests. Thus, he believed in the necessity of maintaining constant vigilance in protecting the mission of public schools from such influences. To the extent necessary, he thought such threats to the system might require each generation to recommit their time and energy to "recreating democracy."

Frederick Jackson Turner also worried about the end of his American frontier and whether it might damage those essential national traits of self-reliance and hard work so very critical to the chemistry of a democratic society and the nation's success. Could these terribly important traits of the American character survive without the challenges of the frontier which created them?

While understandable, looking back, his concern quickly evaporated in the face of what happened since. We managed to create all nature of new frontiers for ourselves: academic ones in astrophysics and quantum mechanics; molecular biology and the subatomic realms of life; human consciousness; the forces involved in producing climate and environment change; exploring the highest peaks to the deepest oceans; the Amazon; the polar regions; outer space; our role in world affairs; living and working with machines possessing "intelligence" that may exceed ours. Plenty of "frontiers" to go around, one for every taste or fancy.

In confronting our new "frontiers" we are asking public education to assist in resolving perceived and real threats and problems that are novel to the early years of the 21st century: the end to a more reassuring view about what it means to be human; the emergence of a machine that cannot only out compute us but become one of our closest advisors, confidants, and friends; rather than dominating and abusing them, the demand we find ways in which our life form can exist compatibly alongside all others in light of the environment's architectural design that its health as a system depends on a healthy inter-relationship between its living parts.

While we do face novelty in resolving our contemporary dilemmas, each generation past has faced its own novel challenges. The task today is to ensure that the novelty of our problems are effectively aligned with the novelty of our commitment to solving them.

Public education's continuing potential in this regard, however, will depend on the degree to which we protect its responsibility to teach our children about the actualities and realities of our nation's past and its present. As in the case of individuals, a population's ability to choose its most healthy path forward will depend on the quality and accuracy of its information about itself. Only in this way can decisions be made that use enduring strengths to correct existing shortcomings. This is what Dewey meant in his perspective about the importance of teaching children how to learn and live successfully in a world of continuous change.

In light of the functions and purposes we have historically assigned to our nation's system of public education, the Oklahoma Academy's 2026 Town Hall Meeting wants to know how Oklahoma's system stacks up, beginning with PK-12.

As the "beginning" also to know how well it accomplishes its purposes not only to graduate informed adults and citizens, but in Dewey's world of constant change, capable of pursuing lifelong learning. The Town Hall will also want to know not only how well those graduates are able to deal with local or state bound challenges but, equally important, how well they are prepared to play direct and active roles in crafting creative solutions to complex and shifting problems that must be resolved at the national and international level; if not, potentially resulting in negative, even life-threatening, consequences for the entire planet and, of course, Oklahoma.

As in the case of our primary and secondary public system nationally, Oklahoma's PK-12's structure reflects an interactive combination of those turn of the 20th century arguments about a "curriculum-centered" and a "child-centered" education. While Dewey's philosophic preoccupations centered on a child-centered approach to teaching and learning, he did understand the need for learning from common core standards to protect the operational integrity of existing institutions. He would be pleased with the degree to which primary and secondary programs pay attention to "real life" individual student learning needs while also serving different types and levels of student ability. He would also be pleased with our recognition of the importance that PK-12 helps prepare individuals capable of dealing with the evolving complexities of a constantly changing world and how they might affect Oklahoma.

He would, however, question the seriousness of our commitment to having a top-flight PK-12 system in light of our historic levels of investment in its operations. For some time now, we have remained in the bottom ten states ranked overall in the category of "child wellbeing". Only recently, have we jumped up to 44th out of 50 states in our investing in public education. Oklahoma's history as a relatively poor state in spending on government services does not paint a very encouraging picture if we are interested in building a system that draws widespread acclaim for the quality of its graduates able to understand and respond creatively to those national and international circumstances that affect the quantities and qualities of Oklahoma life.

That leaves our Town Hall with an obvious question: do we want a public education system that is successful in producing an educated population that is capable of operating at this level and, if so, what will be necessary in order to achieve and permanently sustain this status? Money of course, is an unavoidable issue. This question probably involves no less than another Town Hall meeting devoted exclusively to the question of how we increase levels of government revenue through necessary transformations in the nature and structure of Oklahoma's economy.

Throwing up one's hands here in despair about dollars, however, would rob this Town Hall of its purpose which is to deal with the question of what we can do in the meantime.

Our PK-12 system is certainly not short in its commitment to the socialization side of its mission, providing sustained opportunities to engage in deliberatively collective experiences, e.g., FFA, FHA, Model U.N., all nature of extracurricular options. As one of the Nation's premier "farm clubs" for college and professional sports, Oklahoma's PK-12 does a superb job in celebrating a merger of the rugged individualism and competitive instincts of Turner's frontier while vigorously cheering Dewey's collective team efforts "Under Friday Night Lights".

In the same class as sliced bread, the Internet is probably the most powerful teaching-learning technology that we have ever handed to education and the PK-12's classroom. Connecting through the World Wide Web to Wikipedia, it is a central repository, a global library of constantly expanding data, information, and knowledge. Its content is available 24/7 through electronic means. And now also with an artificial intelligence (AI) ChatBot component, it is available to anyone, anywhere with a Smartphone. And that includes all PK-12 classrooms, all teachers, all students.

It supports classroom instruction as a teaching aid, for grading, and for general administration. It provides students 24/7 access for home study, a mobile library service, tutoring systems for scheduled tests and assignments, and corrective feedback for a range of learning options.

It is not yet clear, however, what the Internet's Smartphone AI/ChatBot effect is having on PK-12 students (Gen Z, mostly) as individuals and on their academic performance working in a traditional classroom setting. The study and learning requirements of a curriculum requiring in-debth, sustained and disciplined attention are not much different than those encountered by the Founders, Turner, Dewey, or myself. It is the type of institutionally and teacher-controlled environment that pointedly protects against any threats to the discipline, concentration, and time involved in the process of effective learning.

Given the enormous family, social and peer pressure to perform and succeed, it should not be surprising now to learn that students using their "backpocket" AI/ChatBot Smartphones might display some tendency to find shortcuts, easy outs, in responding to the curriculum's difficult problems or assignments. Nor should it be surprising that a quick and thoughtless turn to a machine's test answers, written essays or research papers would deprive a student's benefiting from the heavy lifting born of serious study or composition. Constant immersion in this practice would nearly guarantee the result of diminished verbal, writing and critical thinking skills; information and knowledge deficits; and a loss of excitement at the moment of creative revelation.

Whatever may be involved, educators are increasingly alarmed about declining student reading, writing and critical thinking skills; a decline in data and information retention; and a rising incidence of cheating and boasting credit for work done by a machine.

Rising alarm is such that a growing number of state public school systems are already banning all electronic devices from the classroom and developing "filters" for evaluating the learning integrity of take-home assignments. Both further aggravating these concerns while reinforcing efforts to protect the quality of student learning from the perversions of electronic interference, unfortunately recent studies are now suggesting that the same sort of learning deficiencies occur from using electronic screens compared to reading the printed pages of books!

The machine's effect on student psychology and emotions is a more speculative enterprise. What happens when, as constant companions, a student and their machine spend more time talking to one another than with anyone else? In an almost addictive relationship with the student, can a machine's thoughtless and constantly inviting screentime result in distorting the actual realities of space/time by offering a distressing "firehose" deluge of unsettling stories about an awful world; about cruel and vicious human behavior; natural disasters and their destructive consequences; the atrocities of war and conflict; wanton disregard of nature's beauty and environmental health?

Though none of these disparate stories or images have any necessary cause or effect relationship to one another, does their visual focus and composite in the moment disfigure reality? If so, then with the effect to startle the user's impressions to the point of producing fear, anger, anxiety, irritation, and, worst of all, despair?

Such effect is only a short step from developing an image of life not simply repugnant, but a reality at least widely avoided or better still maybe to escape from altogether. Studies of Gen Z attitudes report that at least 50% would prefer to be living at a different time (mostly in the past) and 80% believe the country is headed in the wrong direction. An attitude only reinforced by AI's dismissive promise to willfully eliminate their postgraduate prospects for employment and livelihood as they prepare for the world of work. Not the most encouraging message from the generation of this country's next leaders.

In context of the internet's vulnerability to distortion, our most important responsibility as concerned American citizens must be to protect the capacity of our public system of education to provide a student's learning access to the best and most reliable and accurate data and information available; no less important for those whose interests lie in the private sector. Access to and use of reliable data and information are most likely to result in reliable decisions and reliable consequences. If not, then the "crapshoot" element of chance and unanticipated subversions are more likely to intervene to destroy or at least deter the desired outcome.

Dewey warned us about deliberate efforts to subvert the informational integrity of PK-12's teaching-learning process. Most serious and most threatening, were those ideological or self-serving initiatives designed to pervert the content of data and information, its accuracy and reliability, and to replace it with messages more satisfying to their personal interests and agendas. Also, as Dewey warned, these are the behaviors reflecting more authoritarian societies, based on government and political processes designed to serve the priorities of a select or privileged few broadly celebrated by a compliant and obedient population.

Thus his sense of the imperative that the nation required a system of public education producing self-reliant and informed graduates capable of working through democratic processes to reconcile their own interest in maintaining a society devoted to serving the many.

The problem, however, is that as a system of government designed to resolve and coordinate the many conflicts and disagreements of its disparate interests, democracy never successfully works entirely to satisfy everybody. In fact, at times, even for a majority of its population. Spectacularly and tragically, it failed to deter the awful catastrophe of a mid-19th century civil war that until recently cost more human fatalities than the total of all our military involvements since; nor the loss of many thousands of immigrant lives and a million Native Americans in our 18th and 19th century expanding west across the continent.

Nor has it been able to resolve certain of our society's endemic divisions and conflicts which have long encouraged continuing domestic instabilities involving chronic and bitter arguments and incivilities. And because of this, it is now being blamed for its failure to correct the many "perversions" and "excesses" of modern society by not establishing a morally defined and controlled social order backed by the authority of government to enforce its dictates.

The inherent inefficiencies of a democracy can be a rather uneasy experience, especially in the face of difficult and unresolved problems that resist quick and easy solutions. The longer they remain festering and unresolved, the greater a growing impulse to do something decisively and move on to a better future. Since our founding, this desire to immediately replace ambiguity with clarity has often produced authoritarian tendencies in American life. And, as one solution, it has included a demand that the curricular design of public education be geared to the priority of properly raising our children to populate whatever the contours of its conformist vision of the future.

The source of this country's recurring authoritarianism displays a marvelous, wonderful irony. It is the "fault" of our public schools in successfully producing self-reliant adults and informed citizens for the purpose of managing a democracy in a world characterized by constant change. It works! If the reality of constant change involves the never-ending momentum of some manner of existing order evolving through disorder to some manner of new order, it poses a constant question for citizens vested with responsibility to manage a democracy: how do you provide a semblance of protection for the perceived value of your existing way of life from some unwanted damage caused by change? How do you sustain a reasonable level of institutional stability in the face of what appears to threaten your more familiar and comfortable "manner of existing order"?

Over the period of this nation's history, in any given era, our public system of education produced an always growing hoard of citizens involved with running our democracy. When circumstances appeared to threaten the familiar way of things, in a democracy it should not be surprising that the growing hoard was populated by lots of individuals who did not always, maybe never, agree on the best response to the threat.

While public debate invariably produced a wide range of opinions on how to proceed, they all finally began to boil down to the question of whether more control (authority) was necessary to counter the threat because the virtues of the existing order were worth protecting or whether less (freedom) was required either because the change seemed good or the threat suggested the country would be better off by experimenting with new ways to achieve a better future. This contentious feature has been a part of our nation's life since the outset and will remain so as long as our system of public education is successful in its mission to graduate informed citizens with the responsibility for sustaining our democracy's stability in a constantly changing world. This is what Dewey meant in suggesting that each generation might have to return to the business of "recreating democracy" and why it remains a continuing part of our PK-12 discussion concerning the relative values of both a "curriculum-centered" education and a "child-centered" one.

Recognizing these threats to democratic institutions necessitates a return to our 2026 Town Hall task and at least one central question. What sort of PK-12 curriculum and teach-

ing practices are most likely to result in encouraging the development of those values, traits, tendencies, attitudes, perspectives, habits of mind, etc., that result not simply in crafting a mature adult, but especially a citizen who will want to engage in the civic life of the community? And in doing so, one willing to accept the inevitable and discomforting demands of policy-making in dealing with unprecedented, especially world ending or human distorting, problems created by the forces of a constantly changing world?

Of course, not everyone would want to. But if they did, the nature of their character and personality would probably best include a hodgepodge of characteristics: optimism, courage, curiosity, reliability, perseverance, determination, initiative, sociability. As an active and continuous learner, willingness to confront the unknown; distinguish science from opinion; live with life's contradictions, ambiguities, and unpredictability; distinguish quantitative from qualitative reasoning; capable of living and working with human diversity; recognize the importance of collaboration and teamwork; willingness to explore new and unknown venues; appreciation for the unconventional; ability to identify problems, research solutions, and communicate them to others. Perhaps, most importantly, a genuine sense of hope and aspiration and a belief in progress, that life can be improved, and an understanding that the constructive value and utility of a decision is no better than the value and utility of its consequences.

In concluding this essay, I return to my earlier expressed concern about the now rather frequent argument in this country that the value of the educational enterprise and realms of knowledge should be primarily defined by the degree to which they serve the needs of business and industry and workforce development; that the cost of education can best be justified if successfully linked to a post-graduate financial return sufficient to cover the cost of having acquired the skills. I used the term "training" to categorize those bodies of knowledge presumed most likely to serve this monetized priority in distinction to the term "education", simply to cover the universe of knowledge otherwise.

It is this "universe of knowledge otherwise," good portions of which the Founders used in the late 18th century to create and separate their North American Republic from the British Empire. The same that the nation's leadership used to guide the country's 18th and 19th century expansion west to the Pacific and since into the vagaries of the modern world. The same that produced Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis and John Dewey's thoughts on education's role in a constantly changing world. The same in my own case as I worked through years of advancing study.

If Dewey was correct, and I think he was spot on, that the fundamental meaning of education is to engage the process of making sense out of new experiences born of change, then there is no lifelong end in returning to this "universe of knowledge otherwise" and to wander, hither and yon through a study of philosophy, history, literature, political science, economics, the physical and life sciences, communication, chemistry, art, music, drama, sociology, psychology, or combinations and variations thereof. If you didn't succeed the first time, then it would at least be useful to try and try again.

And, if he is correct about education and change, for those determined to avoid any plan for study that is not specifically crafted to result in a good financial return, and while no implied dispersions on those who do, it might be useful also to know that the average worker will change jobs 13 times throughout life and that the average life an established body of skills will require an upgrade every five years.

Thus in preparing students for this evolving nature in the world of work, beginning in the public schools, it will be exceedingly important that Pk-12 leaders stress that along with money, a job also provides a sense of purpose, accomplishment, public service and self-esteem. It will be even more important for them to also argue the imperative of diligently and purposefully working through the PK-12 curriculum's "universe of knowledge otherwise" distribution requirements as the launching pad for doing the same in completing the general education requirements involved at advanced levels of study. It might even prove to have some value for the working stiff.

As we look to celebrate the 250th year of our Republic, it is important remember that the necessity of our system of public education was for the purpose of protecting the operational nature of democracy. In turn, it became the responsibility of the operational nature of democracy to protect the necessity of its system of public education.

Our democratic system's success in establishing a sustained and balanced relationship between freedom, equality and justice remains elusive. Social, political, and economic inequalities yet remain a divisive part of the American experience. Irrespective, throughout its political life, our democratic system has always managed to settle somewhere in the broad middle between the extremities of aggressive challenges to the established order and reactionary efforts in trying to save it; to at least recognize that "outrage cannot be the business model for democracy." Whatever the intensity of our judgments about the nation's past, it is the interactive companionship of the symbiotic relationship between democracy and education that has produced a great deal to be pleased about and especially with a continuing means and willingness to change it if we aren't.

It is the reason why hope and aspiration retain a genuine currency in our democratic society despite the country's failings and shortcomings. It will require though, that our public system of education remain as the driving core of our potential to succeed; as it has in the past, continue in its supply of self-reliant adults and informed citizens interested in adding further success to the collective efforts of an extraordinarily diverse people.

Oklahoma Native American Students Ranked First in the Nation in Reading and Math, but Funding Cuts Could Change That

Brenna Witchey, Oklahoma Watch, July 31, 2026



Star Yellowfish, director of Native American student services for Oklahoma City Public Schools (left), attends a powwow with students in 2025. (Courtesy Photo/Oklahoma City Public Schools)

Before the school supply pick-up at the Mustang Conference Center even started, children of all ages and their families were streaming through the door.

Volunteers directed them toward the check-in desk, away from the table of distracting colorful backpacks with stacks of school supplies behind them.

The supplies pick-up was organized and funded by the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes' Johnson-O'Malley Office. Students signed in, then received a backpack, school supplies for their grade, snacks and a JOM T-shirt.

Most of the stations were staffed by volunteers. Some hustled to replenish backpacks as they quickly disappeared off the table; others highlighted names at check in or handed out shirts.

School supply pick-ups like this are just one of the supplemental education programs that the Johnson-O'Malley fund supports.

Johnson-O'Malley grants come from congressional appropriations. The money is managed and distributed by the Bureau of Indian Education, which is part of the U.S. Department of the Interior.

The money also supports programs providing cultural and language enrichment, academic support and dropout prevention.

Oklahoma Native American students receive more Title VI and Johnson-O'Malley funding than those in any other state. They have also been scoring near the top in reading and math nationally for more than 30 years, according to a study by the University of Oklahoma released this year. The data for the study came from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, known as the Nation's Report Card.

In 2024, Native American students in Oklahoma were ranked No. 1 in the nation for reading, math and combined achievement among their peers in the 13 other states with sufficient data.

Jackie White, program director of Oklahoma's American Indian Education Department and president of the National Johnson-O'Malley Association Board, said that could be because of her office's work.

The Oklahoma State Department of American Indian Education employs aggressive outreach tactics aimed at ensuring eligible students are accounted for so they can receive support.

That outreach manifests in a yearly Zoom meeting for school superintendents to understand how to count their students, school visits and advocacy at the state level to ensure multiracial children are included in Native American student counts.

The opportunities the Johnson-O'Malley fund provides, however, may be threatened by an increase in eligible students and inaction from Congress.

Star Yellowfish, director of Native American student services at Oklahoma City Public Schools, said one of the determining factors for the No. 1 placement in the Nation's Report Card could be that students are being counted correctly and receiving support because of it.

Nara Nayar, a technical assistant consultant for the American Institutes for Research, said Oklahoma was one of the first states to initiate the collection of tribal affiliation data. That ensures a cleaner analysis of educational results of Native American students.

"Tribal affiliation data collection is huge because it allows disaggregation for the tribes who can then support their students with their own tribal education departments around attendance and tutoring," Nayar said. "Tribal education agencies do so much in terms of programming and supports, so it's that alignment, and it's that support for quality student identification and reporting kind of at the local level that is gonna make all the difference."

That localized solution is hard to execute on a national level, however, when so many states lack sufficient data in the first place. The other states with sufficient data Oklahoma was compared to in the University of Oklahoma study were Alaska, Arizona, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Carolina, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, Wisconsin and Wyoming.

The author of the University of Oklahoma study, Adam Tyner, said the data came from the Nation's Report Card. The exams are given every other year to a sampling of fourth- and eighth-grade students nationwide and are considered the best tool to compare student achievement across states.

Tyner called it the gold standard in nationally comparable standardized testing.

"There's a lot of states that just don't have enough Native American students in order to create a breakout group for them, and so that's the case for most states in most years," he said.

The Nation's Report Card data collection doesn't operate like a census. States have to meet specific statistical thresholds before the federal government decides to break out different student groups. It also does not disaggregate data when two or more races are listed on a student's file.

"If you check that ethnicity box, Hispanic or Latino, then regardless of what you check in the race box, you get reported out as Hispanic or Latino in any kind of reporting that usually states and the federal government does and there's no overlap between these categories," Nayar said.

Nayar works on the Indigenous Student Identification Project. It's a collaborative effort between the American Institutes for Research and the Indigenous Education State Leaders Network. Their research found 70% of Indigenous students in U.S. public schools are not represented in data reporting or analysis.

"I want to know how our Native students are doing," Yellowfish said. "I want to know how our Black students are doing. Our communities want to know if there are disparities. Are there differences? Those are really important things when we are determining: How are students learning? What are they learning?"

Data collected from 2021-22 shows that as many as 66,129 students went uncounted in Oklahoma.

Getting the numbers right is difficult. Historically, Native American students have been undercounted for a few reasons. Forced assimilation, boarding schools and displacement still affect the way data is collected.

"My great-grandmother did not put down the blood quantum she truly was because at that time, it was not a good thing to do," White said.

Her great-great-grandmother came to Oklahoma on the Trail of Tears at 12 years old.

Many people never obtained their citizenship or membership card because people did not see it as important as it is today, White said.

Now, a hurdle that many administrators face is correctly identifying students who are multiracial.

"So many times, our Native students are miscalculated or not counted correctly," Yellowfish said. "So we have Native students that are Black or, they identify as white. They identify as all kinds of things, but they're still tribal

citizens."

The Johnson-O'Malley funding used a standard student count of 272,102 eligible Native American students from 1995 until 2018.

After the Modernization Act passed in 2018, more students became eligible for the program because the requirements for enrollment changed. The updated count for the 2025-26 school year is 317,102. However, the funding has not increased or been adjusted for inflation despite the number of eligible students increasing.

Last December, the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina was recognized federally after 137 years.

"Right now they're anticipating over 10,000 students that are eligible," White said. "Let's just say the count goes up 10,000, but the money doesn't come up, too. What happens? Everybody gets cut."

A catch-22, White said.

"We have to count the students to convince Congress that we need more money and the tribes are there," she said.

That funding deficit is their biggest obstacle, White said.

"It's a fear among tribes and schools, and it's legit, that if they put in every student that's eligible, the count goes up, but the money is not coming with it," White said.

During the 2023-24 school year, 128,401 Native American students were served through 401 Title VI programs in Oklahoma totaling $29.6 million.

There were 48 Johnson-O'Malley contracts or grants serving 107,379 students across 21 participating tribes and 27 public schools in Oklahoma in 2024.

According to the Bureau of Indian Education's yearly budget justifications, Oklahoma's Johnson-O'Malley funds have gone from $1.2 million in 2019 to $1.1 million in 2024. Following the Modernization Act, the national Johnson-O'Malley fund total rose from $14.9 million to $20 million in 2020. The fund has stayed around the $21 million mark since 2021 despite the BIE estimating as many as 578,070 eligible students in 2023.

The Johnson-O'Malley program operates on a budget of $64 per student, leaving funding gaps where once there were none.

In response to the gaps, the Muscogee Nation allocates extra money to bolster the Johnson O'Malley program. They try to maintain a $75 minimum per student. There are approximately 23,000 eligible students in the Muscogee Nation.

The National Indian Education Association continues to call on tribal leaders, educators and partners to petition for an increase in funding from the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs. A hearing would give Johnson-O'Malley participants a chance to show how they are affected by funding gaps.

The 2023 Bureau of Indian Education budget request states that the United States has a trust and treaty responsibility to provide eligible Native American students with a quality education. Maintaining the success of Native American students in Oklahoma might necessitate advocacy at the federal level.

But student success does start locally, White said. She said her office works to facilitate communication between tribal governments, the state, and schools to boost student success and family understanding.

"The key is that it's not you versus me, it's we," White said. "Those are our kids."



Oklahoma Watch
No Favorites No Falsehoods No Fear

These Native tribes are working with schools to boost attendance

Felix Clary, ICT, and Sharon Lurye of the AP, EdSource, December 3, 2024

As the Watonga school system's Indian education director, Hollie Youngbear works to help Native American students succeed in the Oklahoma district — a job that begins with getting them to school.

She makes sure students have clothes and school supplies. She connects them with federal and tribal resources. And when students don't show up to school, she and a colleague drive out and pick them up.

Nationwide, Native students miss school far more frequently than their peers, but not at Watonga High School. Youngbear and her colleagues work to connect with families in a way that acknowledges the history and needs of Native communities.

As she thumbed through binders in her office with records of every Native student in the school, Youngbear said a cycle of skipping school goes back to the abuse generations of Native students suffered at U.S. government boarding schools.

"If grandma didn't go to school, and her grandma didn't, and her mother didn't, it can create a generational cycle," said Youngbear, a member of the Arapaho tribe who taught the Cheyenne and Arapaho languages at the school for 25 years.

Watonga schools collaborate with several Cheyenne and Arapaho programs that aim to lower Native student absenteeism. One helps students with school expenses and promotes conferences for tribal youth. Another holds monthly meetings with Watonga's Native high school students during lunch hours to discourage underage drinking and drug use.

Oklahoma is home to 38 federally recognized tribes, many with their own education departments — and support from those tribes contributes to students' success. Of 34 states with data available for the 2022-2023 school year, Oklahoma was the only one where Native students missed school at lower rates than the state average, according to data collected by The Associated Press.

At Watonga High, fewer than 4% of Native students were chronically absent in 2022-23, in line with the school average, according to state data. Chronically absent students miss 10% or more of the school year, for both excused and unexcused reasons, which sets them behind in learning and heightens their chances of dropping out.

About 14% of students at the Watonga school on the Cheyenne-Arapaho reservation are Native American. With black-lettered Bible verses on the walls of its hallways, the high school resembles many others in rural Oklahoma. But student-made Native art decorates the classroom reserved for Eagle Academy, the school's alternative education program.

Students are assigned to the program when they struggle to keep up their grades or attendance, and most are Native American, classroom teacher Carrie Compton said. Students are rewarded for attendance with incentives like field trips.

Compton said she gets results. A Native boy who was absent 38 days one semester spent a short time in Eagle Academy during his second year of high school and went on to graduate last year, she said.

"He had perfect attendance for the first time ever, and it's because he felt like he was getting something from school," Compton said.

When students do not show up for school, Compton and Youngbear take turns visiting their homes.

"I can remember one year, I probably picked five kids up every morning because they didn't have rides," Compton said. "So at 7 o'clock in the morning, I just start my little route, and make my circle, and once they get into the habit of it, they would come to school."

Around the country, Native students often have been enrolled in disproportionately large numbers in alternative education programs, which can worsen segregation. But the embrace of Native students by their Eagle Academy teacher sets a different tone from what some students experience elsewhere in the school.

Compton said a complaint she hears frequently from Native students in her room is, "The teachers just don't like me."

Bullying of Native students by non-Native students is also a problem, said Watonga senior Happy Belle Shortman, who is Kiowa, Cheyenne and Arapaho. She said Cheyenne students have been teased over aspects of their traditional ceremonies and powwow music.

"People here, they're not very open, and they do have their opinions," Shortman said. "People who are from a different culture, they don't understand our culture and everything that we have to do, or that we have a different living than they do."

Poverty might play a role in bullying as well, she said. "If you're not in the latest trends, then you're kind of just outcasted," she said.

Watonga staff credit the work building relationships with students for the low absenteeism rates, despite the challenges.

"Native students are never going to feel really welcomed unless the non-Native faculty go out of their way to make sure that those Native students feel welcomed," said Dallas Pettigrew, director of Oklahoma University's Center for Tribal Social Work and a member of the Cherokee Nation.

A Tribal Approach to Engaging Educators and Students Through a Native Summer Learning Program

Suzanne Delap, Celia Stall-Meadows, Ashley Nunley, Cheyenne Burkett, & Cassie Mixon, Choctaw Nation

Promoting educational success is a primary focus for the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. Choctaw Nation provides scholarships and programming that support student achievement, yet families with school-age students remain challenged by Oklahoma's limited per capita education funding, ranking in the bottom 10% of U.S. states (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). Furthermore, the cultural needs of Native students are often insufficiently addressed in traditional education practices and curricula.

In response, Choctaw Nation established the Partnership of Summer School Education (POSSE) program in 2013. POSSE is an out-of-school time (OST) summer program for early elementary-aged children attending schools within the reservation's boundaries who demonstrate academic need. A tribally developed education initiative, POSSE provides academic support for students while infusing culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogy and engaging practices for teachers. Following seven years of implementation, this exploratory study was designed to gather insights from POSSE educators regarding perceptions of programmatic impact on students, school staff, and classroom practices.

BACKGROUND

Culturally Sustaining Practices

Culturally sustaining pedagogy requires more than simply responsive or relevant cultural instruction; it sustains the language, literacies, and cultures that students and their community embody (Paris, 2012). Culturally sustaining education relies on the cultural knowledge and experience from students' homes and communities to alleviate social and structural barriers. Essentially, students learn best when making connections to their lived experiences (Harper et al., 2023). By incorporating culturally sustaining pedagogy into the classroom, students experiencing marginalization can receive education equal to that of their peers, and the teachings benefit all students (Parkhouse et al., 2022).

When students receive low-quality instruction in unwelcoming environments, they may suffer from underachievement, which fuels a perception of low academic self-competence (Hunter & Tippeconic, 2020). However, students succeed when they are allowed to participate in curricula that reinforce their language, literacy, and culture (Alim & Paris, 2017). This promotes belonging and connection at school and increases cultural pride and identity. These sentiments result in beneficial outcomes for diverse students, including increased motivation, interest in academic content, and enhanced self-perception of their academic ability, which lays the groundwork for supportive and inclusive teacher–student relationships (Hunter & Tippeconic, 2020).

Culturally relevant professional development for educators leads to increased standardized test scores, improved writing skills, and positive ethnic identity for students, fostering perceptions of respect and appreciation from their teachers (Parkhouse et al., 2022). These relationships are critical foundations of a positive and safe classroom environment that promotes student success (Hunter & Tippeconic, 2020).

For educational programs, culturally sustaining pedagogy is reflected in the resources and access to services for learning communities with diverse needs. For example, incorporation of culturally sustaining pedagogy could include specialty programs and coursework, inclusive signage, language instruction, and communication in multiple languages. It may also include review of accountability structures, teacher evaluation and support systems, and professional development practices (Parkhouse et al., 2022).

Local partnerships, such as those between Choctaw Nation and school sites hosting POSSE, are integral to the success of culturally sustaining OST programs. Community organizations partnering with OST programs hold important knowledge about local community values and resources to help programs succeed. These organizations support and sustain OST programs by providing space, funding, materials, and staff training, as well as developing and delivering programming (Levine, 2024).

For this study, the researchers conceptualized culturally sustaining pedagogy in a broad sense, beyond a single focus on American Indian/Native American curricula. Our view encompasses holistic student and educator experiences within the program, both seen and unseen. These experiences include infusion of Choctaw culture and heritage into program materials and resources, along with support from the tribe for teacher training, programmatic leadership, and summer school partnerships with school communities.

Teacher Engagement

Multiple theories exist regarding employee or work engagement (Shuck, Reio, & Rocco, 2011), ranging from human motivational approaches to economic measures of behavior (Pincus, 2023). As a broad term, work engagement may be measured in terms of vigor, dedication, and/or absorption in one's job (Minghui et al., 2018) and as the positive and fulfilling state of well-being or attitude about one's work (Bakker et al., 2008). In the education sector, educator engagement has been conceptualized in three dimensions: cognitive, emotional, and social (Klassen et al., 2013). These constructs draw heavily from Kahn's (1990) theory of teacher engagement, which defines engagement as "the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in

engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances" (Kahn, 1990, p. 694).

Employees who are engaged at work feel connected to a larger purpose within their organization and are more likely to commit to that purpose. Applying this principle to the educational setting, teachers who feel connected with their school organization experience deeper commitments to their jobs, schools, and students. Furthermore, resources such as social support from colleagues and supervisors enhance teacher engagement (Hultell & Gustavssen, 2011), thereby leading to increased connection and commitment. Teachers with this sense of commitment
demonstrate greater effort and are less likely to leave their jobs, with a significant correlation among teachers' success, their enthusiasm, and positive outcomes for teacher–student relationships (Jackson, 2018).

Increased educator engagement benefits both teachers and students. For example, self-determination theory posits that teacher engagement influences the quality of teacher–student relationships (Wang et al., 2022). Students build positive relationships when teachers make them feel valued by supporting their life situations and respecting their perspectives (Jones & Jones, 2020). This, in turn, significantly affects student motivation, which supports improved academic engagement and behavioral outcomes for students. Conversely, negative teacher–student relationships are associated with students' lack of enjoyment of school, limited cooperation in the classroom, and overall diminished academic readiness (Palermo et al., 2007). The implications for OST programs are that students will have higher investment and improved outcomes when they feel a sense of belonging fostered by a welcoming atmosphere. Therefore, educator engagement is integral to promoting culturally sustaining pedagogy and fostering student success in both the regular and OST classroom settings.

For this study, researchers conceptualized teacher engagement as teachers' self-reported increased enthusiasm for their work. Engagement was also defined as a sense of purpose, meaning that educators perceived that their work in the POSSE program made a difference in both their professional lives and their students' lives.

Program Context

Originally established in a single school district, the POSSE program has expanded to 52 host sites across nearly 11,000 square miles of the Choctaw Nation reservation in southeastern Oklahoma. Internal education data from Choctaw Nation show that the POSSE program has enrolled approximately 38,000 students to date, including 33% who identify as Native American. Since its inception, POSSE has served students in kindergarten (22%), first (24%), second (21%), third (19%), and fourth (6%) grades. Currently, POSSE's programming supports students in grades K–3.

Regardless of race, all early elementary students within Choctaw Nation territory who score below the 40th percentile on nationally normed reading assessments are invited to participate in POSSE. Others are invited based on recommendations by school staff. The average student–teacher ratio is 10.8:1.

Methods

The purpose of this study was to qualitatively explore educator perceptions of POSSE's impact on students, school staff, and classroom practices. Perspectives were sought from principals and teachers during six focus groups. Additional descriptive statistics provide educator demographics.
The study design was approved by the Choctaw Nation Institutional Review Board and conducted by the Choctaw Nation tribal research department and an external Choctaw researcher. Since 2016, the tribal research department, managed by a professional Native American educator, has conducted scientific research for the tribe, allowing tribal leaders to make value-rich and data-driven decisions.

Data collection for the study occurred during the Choctaw Nation Professional Learning Conference (CNPLC) held in Durant, Oklahoma, in May 2022. To recruit educators for the sample, researchers selected an equal number of smaller and larger POSSE sites from the CNPLC registration list to represent all quadrants of the reservation. Researchers then contacted principals at selected sites via phone to invite them to participate in a focus group. Each principal was also asked to recommend one novice and one veteran POSSE teacher for focus group participation. Principals used their own discretion when categorizing POSSE teachers as novice or veteran. The tribal research manager contacted teachers via email with an invitation to participate. Before each focus group, participants provided informed consent, with documents stored securely by the research department.

Six researchers conducted the focus groups in pairs consisting of one senior researcher and one research assistant. The three senior researchers were Choctaw tribal members, lending cultural sensitivity to the data collection process. Focus groups began with a standardized script read aloud to participants. Research assistants noted information on coding sheets, allowing the research team to cross-reference names and speaking order with recorded voices.

Participants introduced themselves by sharing their first name, total years of teaching experience, and time spent in the summer learning program. On average, novice teachers had 1.1 years of experience teaching in POSSE and 9.2 years of teaching during the regular school year, and veteran teachers averaged 4.7 years in POSSE and 17.5 years in the school year. Principals reported an average of 16 years of teaching experience and 6.5 years in the principal role.

Table 1 contains the questions asked of all focus groups. Within 24 hours following the focus groups, the three lead and senior researchers documented overall impressions of their focus groups in the form of two-page field notes, which were shared among the researchers as well as with POSSE

Table 1. Focus Group Questions, May 2022

Items	Asked of Principals	Asked of Teachers
What do you see as the most significant change in teachers as a result of POSSE?	X	X
What do you see as the most significant change in students who attended POSSE?	X	X
What are social/emotional needs that could be hindering students in the classroom?	X	X
In what ways does POSSE support social/emotional needs of its students?	X	X
What do you see as the most pressing academic needs of our students?	X	X
What aspect of POSSE has the greatest impact on students' academic achievement?	X	X
What aspect of POSSE has the greatest impact on students' confidence?	X	X
In your opinion, what determines success in the POSSE program?	X	X
How might these successes affect Choctaw children's adult lives?	X	X
What are your perspectives on (thoughts about) integrating the Choctaw culture in the POSSE curriculum?	X	
What suggestions do you have for other POSSE principals?	X	
What suggestions do you have for other POSSE teachers?		X

administrators. For accuracy, the focus group sessions were recorded, transcribed using Descript software, and verified by lead researchers. Following processes described by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Miles and Huberman (1994), inductive thematic analysis was used to identify important descriptive concepts (such as data elements). Researchers initially coded their own sessions; interrater reliability was achieved by reviewing and crossvalidating field notes and coding processes via shared files. Emerging concepts were grouped into themes; the relative importance of each theme was determined by content analysis or frequency of occurrences. A natural break in frequency of theme occurrences aided researchers in selecting the top themes (n = 7); these are discussed in the Findings section. A coding example for one of the most frequently occurring themes, Confidence, is shown in Table 2 on the following page.

Figure 1. Tanchi Illustration of POSSE Interview Themes



Focus Group Findings

This section presents each primary theme from the principal and teacher focus groups. The seven themes developed through inter-rater coding were Engaged Students, Engaged Teachers; Inspiration and Motivation; Love of Learning; Providing a Social Safety Net; Giving Voice; Lifetime of Confidence; and Planting Seeds for Future Success.

To visualize each theme from a cultural lens, a graphic using traditional Chahta tanchi (corn) was developed (Figure 1). Tanchi was chosen because it represents a meaningful and cultural food staple used by Choctaw people for centuries.

Engaged Students, Engaged Teachers

POSSE educators experienced autonomy during the summer learning program that was different from that experienced during their traditional academic year. They felt empowered to follow best practices and experiment with teaching methods that met each student at their level. For example, POSSE educators focused on content mastery as opposed to "teaching to a test," such as standardized and highstakes assessments. This resulted in greater teacher enthusiasm and a positive sense of renewal in their teaching careers.

Many POSSE teachers and principals observed that engagement was a reciprocal process between teachers and students. When children exhibited increased excitement and interest, it led to positive outcomes for teachers, such as increased enthusiasm and a sense of professional renewal. This reciprocal loop of engagement was noted by both experienced and novice educators across subject areas. A principal in a focus group stated, "If your teacher is excited, guess what? You're going to be excited. The kids really feed off the teachers, a relaxed atmosphere, and their willingness to be there and make it fun."

Inspiration and Motivation

POSSE was a source of both academic and social inspiration for students. During the regular school year, some POSSE students exhibited social–emotional needs manifesting as discipline concerns and social skills challenges. During POSSE, students were given opportunities to practice and model positive friendship skills. Many children found commonalities with peers while viewing themselves in a new, positive light. Teachers and administrators noted that POSSE students were inspired by their successes rather than demotivated by their failures: "[T]he focus level goes way up with those kids … it's just little, small victories that you get to see here and there, but those are huge milestones for a lot of kids," said a veteran teacher.

Table 2. Identifying *Confidence* Theme by Coding Data Elements

Data Elements	Frequency
Increases student confidence	10
Builds student confidence and sense of pride	10
Builds confidence and sense of pride	9
Confidence (for students)	9
Builds student confidence	4
Small groups help to increase student confidence	4
Less intimidating (for students)	3
Fosters student/teacher confidence	1
Increased self-confidence	1
Large classes during school year decrease student confidence	1
Teachers need to be excited to build student confidence	1

Having supplemental and culturally relevant resource materials provided by POSSE was seminal for educators. Returning POSSE teachers benefited from themed literacy and mathematics tools, such as free trade books for students to use and keep. These resources provided flexibility and creativity in instruction, because teachers were allowed to scale instructional approaches according to their professional strengths and student needs. Further, teachers applied the themed learning to their academic year outside POSSE and viewed POSSE as an ongoing supportive resource. For educators, the toolkits and resources were a source of inspiration for their teaching practices that endured well after the summer school program ended.

Love of Learning

For many students, learning gains in POSSE represented their first experiences with academic success. POSSE's small group settings were often cited as the primary reason for improved student performance, along with teachers having time to return to concepts and to appropriately pace learning for each student. One principal explained this phenomenon in action:

A lot of students are more excited about coming to school because it's more of a 10:1, 11:1, 12:1 ratio. They get more individualized instruction, and they're more successful. They're not frustrated. That transcends not only through the summer, but they're more excited about coming back to school when school starts.

Educators noted that POSSE students were excited about attending summer school in a way that contrasted with their usual school year experiences. Many teachers and principals reported that they, too, experienced this increased excitement in their approach to POSSE.

Providing a Safety Net

The extended school year was an opportunity to provide wraparound support for POSSE students. When asked to describe challenges faced by students in Choctaw Nation, teachers reported lack of childcare, isolation, poverty, and food insecurity as realities for many families. As a buffer against these challenges, POSSE provided a consistent and predictable schedule for students, maintained a safe and secure setting during the summer, and helped combat food insecurity by providing free breakfast and lunch to each participating child. These provisions met basic needs and supplied critical foundations for supporting student readiness for learning. POSSE, as an extended OST learning program, ensured that the primary needs of students were consistently met— needs that often derail student capacity for learning. A veteran teacher shared:

> *[There are] lots of broken homes and lots of kids coming to school with a lot of trauma in their lives, that these little five- and six-year-old kids have to endure, I mean nightly and during the day, so school's their happy place, it's their safe place. So that's what I like about [POSSE].*

Giving Voice

POSSE elevated the voices of educators and their students. POSSE staff were given autonomy and the necessary resources to determine how best to meet their students' needs, and teacher voices were further highlighted during the subsequent focus group process. POSSE students became much more vocal and likely to contribute during summer school classes through increased participation, raising hands to answer questions, and interacting with peers. A veteran teacher observed that POSSE's small group settings allowed teachers to provide individualized attention that empowered student voices:

> *You can focus on what each student needs. You can— not that we don't try to do that throughout the year, but it's just easier when you're in a small group. They start talking and you find out so much because once they start talking, they don't stop.*

For teachers and principals, this led to positive teaching ex-

periences and potential easing of stressful aspects of education, such as navigating disciplinary referrals and behavioral concerns.

Traditional education settings in the U.S. have marginalized Native teachings, leading to a lack of exposure to tribal culture and decreased relevance for Native students. In contrast, POSSE educators noted that the program provides a platform for Choctaw culture and heritage. Through POSSE, students were introduced to Choctaw language and history. Trade books, such as Chukfi Rabbit's Big Bad Belly Ache (a Choctaw traditional folktale), were provided free of charge to each student. The books were used during classroom instruction before being sent home with the student for use after summer school. By giving voice to Choctaw language and culture within the learning environment, the program provided a bridge for Native students to learn more about their heritage while also introducing Native teachings to non-Native students.

Lifetime of Confidence

POSSE educators indicated that the program fosters a love of learning that sets the stage for improved academic outcomes in the future. Small group settings, cultural teaching resources, autonomous instructional approaches, and social–emotional learning opportunities worked together to build confidence in POSSE students. Essentially, experiencing academic and social success instilled a belief in students that they could succeed. Teachers and principals noted that this belief flowed into increased enthusiasm and engagement at school and with peers, enduring well into the following school year. A veteran teacher shared:

> *I think it helps for those kids to build that confidence that normally doesn't get to shine during [the] normal school year when we're in regular class with all the other kids. It gives them the opportunity to shine with summer school and they feel like they're proud, you know, and they're confident, that confidence.*

Planting Seeds for Future Success

POSSE teachers noted that the program can have a potential lifelong impact for students. Modeling, broadening student's horizons, and instilling confidence during the early years of development may lead to improved life outcomes for students, such as degree attainment and vocational success. A novice teacher shared thoughts on the importance of modeling positive future outcomes for POSSE students:

> *In their adult life, they realize when they do get older, they're not limited to what mom and dad, and grandma or grandpa, have always done. Then they know because they are becoming better readers and more confident, they have options of what they want to do with their life. They're not stuck in the same town or the same place. They can choose to do that if they want to, but it's just a choice now and not a generational curse.*

For example, POSSE incorporated field trips into the summer learning program. For instance, students visited a local vocational-technical campus and fire training facility to learn about careers as first responders. They learned fishing skills at a state park on the reservation. Students toured the Choctaw Nation hangar and learned about careers in aviation. The Choctaw Nation recycling center taught lessons in waste management. They toured a grocery store and learned about careers in food distribution. A popular cultural destination was the Choctaw Cultural Center, where students learned social dancing, beading, or cornhusk doll making. Teachers and principals cited these experiential learning opportunities as among the most impactful elements of POSSE. Many noted that students in Choctaw Nation may lack access to models of vocational and academic success, or that they live in isolated communities. POSSE field trips represent ways to expand students' horizons by modeling different vocations and opportunities within their communities.

Teachers and principals were also positively affected by the POSSE program. The autonomy and support provided by POSSE represented a professional renewal, which led to increased enthusiasm as educators reinvested in their careers.

Discussion

Given POSSE's unique opportunity to reach tribal and nontribal children early and effectively, the implications of influencing future growth and success in Indian country are profound. The focus group findings highlight how providing support, building confidence, and empowerment can increase engagement and investment for both teachers and their students in OST settings.

Professional Implications for Educators

Educators often cited small group settings and autonomous teaching opportunities as seminal components of the POSSE program. Teachers could reinvest in their careers by engaging in their preferred teaching modalities while providing individualized instruction. Students also benefited from an increased love of learning and confidence in their academic and social skills. This led to deeper engagement, paving the way for improved academic and social outcomes for POSSE children.

Academic/Social Emotional Loop

The POSSE program provides academic support for students struggling to meet grade- and age-based benchmarks. Educators have noted the links between poor academic performance and behavioral and social skills challenges. At first glance, the POSSE program appears to center solely on academic skills. However, the interconnection between academic and social– emotional development is clear. By providing students with small group settings that encourage success and allowing teachers to dedicate time to individualized instruction, POSSE models a supportive classroom environment fostering social skills development, leading to decreased discipline referrals and improved peer interactions.

POSSE demonstrates the importance of early academic and social intervention, coupled with addressing unique needs and realities of children living in Choctaw Nation. Food insecurity, lack of access to childcare, and isolation were cited as

concerns. Providing a form of wraparound services in summer, POSSE represents a bridge between ensuring wellness and encouraging academic gains for children.

OST summer learning programs offer opportunities to fill gaps between academic and social outcomes. Safety, social–emotional wellness, and enrichment form building blocks of health and well-being for students facing significant challenges in their home lives. Considering that many students, both Native and non-Native, on tribal lands can benefit from access to social support, programs like POSSE represent pathways to supporting these children in numerous ways.

Culturally Sustaining Approach and Implications

Intervening early in a student's academic life and incorporating relevant culture are important pathways to improving academic success and promoting inclusion. Native students may feel disenfranchised in educational settings. To address this, POSSE incorporates Choctaw language and celebrates Choctaw customs to create a welcoming environment. This inclusion has immediate academic and social impacts, promoting a culturally sustaining approach by engaging both Choctaw and non-Native youth during a critical learning period.

As a valued link in the chain of cradle-to-career initiatives, POSSE's extended summer learning plays a crucial role for vulnerable children in Choctaw Nation. POSSE students were given access to experiential learning opportunities such as guest speakers and field trips, modeling positive vocational and life outcomes. By allowing children to think outside their daily experience, POSSE exists as an incubator for future success and allows children to envision what could be, rather than simply what is.

The findings from this research demonstrate the unique potential for Native nation building in OST education. Developed by Choctaw Nation, POSSE's goals are twofold: to address the specific learning needs of children in Choctaw Nation through summer recovery education, and to suffuse curricula with Choctaw language and culture. Students are introduced to basic Choctaw vocabulary and have access to culture and heritage, which enhances academic and social relevance for Native students in POSSE and introduces these topics to non-Native students. It is important that Native students feel represented in their curriculum and school settings. For nonNative students, exposure to Native culture is the first of many steps to combat the marginalization and "othering" of Native peoples, with the ultimate goal of improving representation across multiple academic and social settings.

Recommendations for Practice

Encouraging academic success in a culturally rich setting is an important goal for OST programs like POSSE. Similar to POSSE students, many Native youths attend school in public education systems. For communities located within or near tribal boundaries, programs like POSSE present pathways to encourage and support improved academic outcomes and to provide culturally sustaining instruction in a partnership model between tribes and local school agencies. Specifically, the partnership between the Choctaw Nation and its 52 public school host sites highlights the benefits of collaborating with external organizations to create and sustain OST programming. For example, in the POSSE program, Choctaw Nation coordinates logistics, funding, and materials, and develops culturally grounded programming. As an external partner, the public school system provides access to a skilled educator workforce and significant infrastructure that bolsters OST program delivery.

Next, the POSSE program recruits public school educators to engage in learning that focuses on formative and student-paced processes, rather than "teaching to a test" or state standards. Educators in this study highlighted the benefit of a model that revitalizes teacher and student engagement and success. Teachers and principals shared their increased enthusiasm and sense of renewal and remarked on students' improved behavioral, academic, and personal growth. The processes developed by POSSE demonstrate the reciprocal, positive loop between teacher and student engagement. Essentially, OST programs can reap twofold benefits of improved student outcomes and positive workforce engagement through a liberating and culturally sustaining approach.

However, a general lack of awareness of Native teachings, lack of workforce capacity, and logistical and cost challenges are barriers to implementation of culturally sustaining programming for Native students. For programs that serve Native students but are not in proximity to Native lands, forging relationships and increasing awareness of Native identities and practices are the building blocks of promoting student engagement and improved outcomes. As a next step, non-tribal OST programs may consider merging Native teachings (such as traditional folktales and experiential learning) into curricula. Consulting with elders in tribal communities and inviting feedback from Native families are additional ways to begin the journey from cultural sensitivity to culturally sustaining educational practices, building bridges that ensure academic success for all Native youth.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We sincerely thank the focus group participants for their participation and invaluable contributions. We also thank Blakelynn Daniel and Dannielle Branam for their contributions to the focus group research.

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A $40,000-per-Year AI School With No Teachers Is Opening in Oklahoma This August

Maya Henry, Oklahoma Watch, July 21, 2026

An AI-powered, billionaire-backed chain of private schools promises to educate students with two hours of virtual learning a day and entrepreneurship workshops.

There are no teachers, and tuition is nearly double the most expensive private school in the state.

This is Alpha School and, come August, it's touching down in Oklahoma.

Here's how it works, according to Alpha: Students start each morning on a laptop, with two hours on Alpha's adaptive, AI learning platform. Half an hour is allotted to each core subject: math, reading, science and social studies. Then, in the afternoon, students learn through projects and workshops that build life skills.

Alpha's rejection of tradition is its draw; for one soon-to-be Alpha parent, whose son will start eighth grade at the Tulsa location, the workshops and highly personalized learning convinced her family to commit.

Alpha opened its first school in Austin, Texas, in 2014 and has since expanded to six states and 12 spinoff schools. Alpha is opening 28 new campuses this fall, including in Oklahoma City and Tulsa, more than tripling its footprint across the country.

Before ChatGPT, Alpha students learned directly from online platforms such as IXL, Khan Academy and YouTube. Now, Alpha uses a proprietary artificial intelligence program it developed called 2 Hour Learning, which personalizes curriculum and claims to teach students twice as fast as traditional school models.

Alpha has been the subject of enthusiastic coverage from The New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Business Insider and others. Few outlets have flagged concerns with the technology or the company.

News outlets 404 Media and Wired published stories in the past year that accused Alpha of scraping online learning platforms to develop 2 Hour Learning, though an Alpha spokeswoman disputed that claim and said the company respects the intellectual property of the companies it works with.

A line of broken contracts and licenses with the companies follows Alpha, 404 Media reported, as do concerns about the AI program's efficiency and privacy: 404's investigation found examples of AI hallucination and seemingly unsolvable quiz questions in the curriculum.

There are privacy concerns, too. Alpha's AI programming employs screen monitoring and takes photos of students when the program notices a lack of progress or unusual screen patterns. The system once captured a video of a student working on schoolwork in her pajamas in bed, the Wired investigation revealed.

Anna Davlantes, chief communications officer for Alpha, said the 404 Media and Wired stories relied on cherry-picked examples and sources who'd been fired from Alpha. Alpha may pursue legal action against the news outlets, she said.

But Alpha's fans are loud. Alpha earned the backing of top Trump administration officials, sent an 11-year-old student to the State of the Union address on the arm of Melania Trump, and hosted and wooed Gov. Kevin Stitt at an Austin Alpha school site in December.

Alpha plans to open a kindergarten-through-10th-grade school in Edmond, branded the Oklahoma City campus, and a kindergarten-through-8th-grade school in Tulsa. As of July 20, 26 students were enrolled at the Edmond site and 32 at the Tulsa school, according to Alpha's website.

The schools are arriving as debates over the Parental Choice Tax Credit program, AI in schools and Oklahoma's dismal education ranking play out loudly across the state. For excited families and skeptics alike, the opening of the schools will be a test of how Oklahoma responds to a new frontier of unconventional, ultra-expensive schools.

A School with No Teachers

Guides are the closest stand-in Alpha has for teachers. There's one key difference, though: guides don't touch any curriculum.

Guides monitor students' progress and productivity with the AI tutor, but aren't in the room when students are learning, according to job postings. In the afternoons, guides run one-hour skill workshops for students as young as 5. Past workshops have focused on sailing, programming toy cars and completing Navy SEAL challenges.

At one Alpha workshop in San Francisco, the school sent middle school students to a Starbucks with preloaded cards, Wendy Vassiliou, whose son will start at the Tulsa location come August, said. Unbeknownst to the students, their guide had zeroed the account balance for at least one student, meaning their card was rejected at the checkout. The lesson aimed to teach students how to handle disappointment.

Guides earn $100,000 to $150,000 per year, according to Alpha's Oklahoma job postings, two to three times the salary of a first-year public school teacher.

Alpha doesn't require guides to have teacher certification, and intentionally recruits people with unconventional education backgrounds. The San Francisco guide had a career as a sports psychologist.

Guides can hold a bachelor's degree in any subject. Alpha says it vets candidates with a cognitive test, an intensive background check and a months-long training camp in Austin. From there, guides are sent across the country to Alpha sites.

Rep. Cyndi Munson, D-Oklahoma City, took issue with Alpha's no-teacher model.

"These types of schools and models that are being implemented are taking away the seriousness of what it takes to be a classroom teacher," she said. "It is very disturbing and should worry all of us."

Alpha students won't get the vital educational and emotional support students receive from certified teachers, said Erika Wright, founder and leader of the Oklahoma Rural Schools Coalition Facebook group and a community organizer with the Oklahoma Appleseed Center for Law and Justice.

"This is a travesty for those kids," Wright said.

Tuition is Steep

The school is endorsed by hedge fund manager Bill Ackman and funded in part by software investor and Alpha principal Joe Liemandt, who recently committed $1 billion to schools including Alpha.

Families still pay a premium.

Alpha's tuition in Oklahoma will be $40,000 per year, toppling the prices of the next-closest private schools in both areas: Edmond's Oklahoma Christian School is $14,640 per year and Tulsa's Holland Hall charges $21,625 annually. Bordering Edmond closely, Oklahoma City's most expensive, Casady School, is $27,950 for high school students. In some states, Alpha families pay $75,000 per year.

Any family that joins Alpha for the 2026-2027 inaugural academic year receives a $10,000 discount for five years, bringing tuition down to $30,000, Davlantes said. Beyond that, there's no school-sponsored financial aid, at least for the first year of the new campuses.

Vassiliou said she knows that $30,000 or $40,000 is a significant amount to most Americans. She respects public schools, she said; her dad was a school superintendent, and she worked at Jenks schools. She said Alpha is worth it anyway. If her son, Cullen, had continued at the private school he's attended for 10 years, eighth-grade tuition would've cost $16,000.

Vassiliou doesn't consider herself especially experimentalist and said committing to Alpha, sight unseen, is out of character for her. Alpha's extensive library of promotional materials and a series of glowing profiles in The New York Times and Wall Street Journal helped assure her.

Alpha's Edmond campus was initially included on the Oklahoma Tax Commission's list of schools approved for the Parental Choice Tax Credit, a voucher-like program that pays families up to $7,500 per year for private school tuition and other educational expenses. The tax credit program requires schools to be in Oklahoma and accredited, though schools have until March 2027 to meet the accreditation provision.

In response to questions from Oklahoma Watch, the tax commission removed Alpha from its approved schools.

A spokeswoman for Alpha said they didn't apply for the tax credit program. Alpha School is accredited by Cognia, but the accreditor will need to conduct site visits and ensure compliance with its standards at the new Oklahoma locations before they are included, which could occur by next school year.

The tax credit program was pitched as a way to make private schools more accessible for families who otherwise wouldn't be able to afford tuition. But critics argue that the tax credit directs public funding to families making above-average incomes. Of the nearly $248 million allotted to families by the program in the 2025-2026 academic year, $169 million in tax credits went to families earning more than $75,000 a year, more than the state's median household income of $65,039.

That's especially true among Alpha's families, for whom the tax credit may only shave off a minimal amount of the tuition. All founding Alpha families will have to pay the $30,000 tuition for the first year in full, with no financial aid or tax credit at their disposal.

"What scares me is they're going to try to take even more public school funds to do their little pet school projects," said Jami Cole, an elementary educator and leader of the public school advocacy group Edvocates.

AI Guardrails for Public Schools, Not Private

The Legislature this year introduced guardrails for AI in public schools, but those rules won't apply to Alpha, which is a private school.

The Oklahoma Responsible Technology in Schools Act, introduced by Sen. Ally Seifried, R-Claremore, passed unanimously through both chambers of the Legislature in May. The law requires all school districts to establish an AI policy and mandates educators maintain final decision-making authority over any AI-assisted instruction, grading or

placement.

At Alpha, both tenets are broken.

Seifried said she's fascinated by Alpha and will be monitoring how it fares. Seifried is a strong proponent of the Parental Choice Tax Credit, and celebrated that Alpha parents may qualify for it in years to come.

Still, she warned that AI must be coupled with caution.

"AI and technology are moving at such a quick pace that we just want to make sure that we're not hamstringing our teachers or our districts, but also making sure that students are safe," she said.

Alpha promises an education, courtesy of its AI program, that laps the public school system, which, in Oklahoma, is ranked second-to-worst according to sites such as WalletHub. The average SAT score of Alpha seniors is a 1545, an Alpha spokesperson said. A perfect score is 1600. Alpha's students score an average of 4.2 to 4.4 on Advanced Placement tests.

Sen. Regina Goodwin, D-Tulsa, still doesn't get it.

"I understand we have challenges with our public education," she said. "But the answer is not to just eliminate human involvement that is certified."

Governor Wanted to Bring Alpha to Oklahoma

Alpha is at the forefront of an AI-friendly governor's office.

Stitt has been vocal in his support of AI, throwing support behind concepts like Alpha, even if not publicly addressing Alpha by name. In December 2025, Alpha's Texas Sports Academy hosted a conference for the National Governors Association, which Stitt chairs. Stitt filmed and uploaded a video to Facebook lauding new technology and AI, including AI schools. He vowed to bring programs like the school back to the state.

Stitt's support of Alpha's methods is at odds with his sharp pushback against virtual schooling in the state's public schools. In May 2025, he signed a bill into law limiting virtual instruction in any public school district to 12 hours per academic year.

"Governor Stitt is talking out of both sides of his mouth," Wright said. "This concept is a complete slap in the face for all of the districts who have been working diligently to have quality virtual stuff that's been shut down by the Legislature."

Rhett Jones, a 2024 graduate of Alpha's Austin campus, said he saw Stitt in the Austin Alpha offices in February. Stitt's staff made contact shortly after and asked him and other Alpha graduates to travel to Oklahoma, as arranged by Stitt's team, to meet prospective Alpha Oklahoma families. Jones agreed and made the visit on February 23.

Jones credited Alpha with pushing him to launch two businesses, a mountain bike park and Cased, an e-commerce action sports apparel company.

Until Alpha mentors encouraged him to pitch investors in his junior year of high school, he thought being a business founder wasn't in the cards for him.

"I thought high school entrepreneurs were prodigies and I was a very regular kid," he said. "I just played video games, played sports."

He decided to drop out of the University of Austin, an unaccredited university founded in 2021 backed by Palantir founder Peter Thiel, to go all-in on Cased. Alpha supported his less-traditional pathway.

"The school truly unlocks kids educationally in a way other schools can't," he said.

Alpha is Recruiting Families and Staff

Alpha School's first day is August 12. Alpha leased more than 6,000 square feet of industrial space in Edmond for the Oklahoma City school, but the building was barren and bore no Alpha signage when Oklahoma Watch visited.

Alpha hasn't yet secured a location in Tulsa. In mid-May, the school sent a report, prepared with AI, detailing two potential Tulsa sites, to prospective parents. One user noted that the report cited incorrect data.

The campuses are still recruiting new students, too, for a $100 application fee.

Alpha warns applicants that the school isn't equipped to meet the needs of students requiring intensive behavioral, therapeutic, or one-to-one academic support. Applicants are asked to disclose any Individualized Education Program, 504 plan, or behavior or learning plan or risk being withdrawn.

Weeks away from the first day of classes, families are eager.

Cullen, Vassiliou's son entering eighth grade at the Tulsa campus, said he thinks Alpha will be more fun and set him up with better opportunities and education than the school he now attends.

Vassiliou has researched the drawbacks of Alpha — the data-scraping claims, accreditation inconsistencies, and legislative criticism — and is still confident in her family's decision.

"I'm going to look and scour the internet for every bad thing I can find about Alpha," she said she decided before her family locked in their choice. "And so I looked at everything I could find, and I still was not deterred."

TRANSCRIPT: Why Did We Let Big Tech Take Over Education?

Sophie Winkleman, After Babel, July 13, 2026

Introduction by Jon Haidt:

Tipping points.

One happened for phone-free schools in 2025 across the US and around the world. One is happening now, in 2026, for raising the age for social media accounts to 16 around the world.

And my prediction is that one will come for EdTech in 2027, in particular for the "1:1 device policies," which put laptops and tablets on each student's desk.

As phones are being taken out of schools, the problems of EdTech have become more visible. Teachers and parents are feeling that something is not right, and they're beginning to see that others feel the same way. In a striking example of change brewing, the Los Angeles school board voted unanimously to remove computers from pre-K through first grade, influenced by the advocacy of a grassroots group of parents and teachers, "Schools Beyond Screens." A national movement is growing here in the US, and it's international, too. Sweden, for example, a country that had previously gone "all in" on technology in classrooms starting in preschool, decided to scale back the use of digital devices in schools, and reemphasize books, pens, and paper.

One of the most compelling advocates making the problems of EdTech visible for all to see is Sophie Winkleman. She is an actress and children's advocate who has been raising the alarm in the UK since 2023. She and I are working with Hugh Grant and Close Screens Open Minds to raise awareness. Here on After Babel, we featured one of her most powerful public lectures on this topic in February of 2025. And now she's back with an even more important speech, given at the Alliance for Responsible Citizenship conference in London a few weeks ago. Drawing on new research and vivid metaphors, she calls for a radical and evidence-based rethinking of the role of technology in education.

I hope you'll watch her speech below. If you prefer to read the text, we have provided a transcript after the video. Thank you, Sophie, for writing this beautiful talk and sharing it with our readers at After Babel.

Transcript

A few months ago, I was introduced to a headteacher, Justine, who works at a primary school in Hertfordshire. One sunny afternoon, Justine cancelled the lessons, opened the back doors, and told the children to "go and play." They looked at her confused, and shuffled out to the grassy area outside the school. She watched them stand around awkwardly for a few minutes until they asked to come back in.

She came to realize that these children did not have the capacity to "go and play"; they couldn't create their own fun, their own entertainment, so accustomed were they to receiving entertainment via their devices.

When we talk about children, social media, smartphones, iPads, we tend to frame the discussion around the issue of harmful material. But Justine's pupils weren't traumatized by harmful material, they were just dazed, glazed, and passive, their young minds deactivated by constant, low-level stimulation.

Justine removed screen-based story-time from the school's timetable and encouraged parents to let their children read or just get bored at home. Boredom costs nothing and is a crucial catalyst for the imagination.

A few months later, Justine tells me, the children can't be stopped from tearing outside at break-time, their imaginations and sociability blossoming beautifully.

Teachers like Justine, along with parents, doctors, academics, and neuroscientists around the world, feel confounded that the very machines destroying children's imaginations, concentration spans, and capacity to think at home, are now the principal conduits for their education at school.

Internet-enabled devices are being handed out in schools across the world on the pretext of delivering a "future-proof" education. One million children in Britain spend nearly every lesson on a screen. Welcome to the world of EdTech.

Many parents — who see what screen-based learning is doing to their child — are not buying this sales pitch. They write to each other in burgeoning online communities:

Where are the books? Why has my child's education been reduced to a series of links, games, and videos? Why is my child accessing obscene content on his school-issued iPad? The school filters don't work. Where is my child's private data going? Why is my child online for his homework every night? He's getting headaches, he's getting cranky, he keeps going off task, he's going to sleep later, and he's now short-sighted — I did not sign up to this?!

A number of these parents are moving their online rage to real-world action.

The US-based alliance Schools Beyond Screens recently persuaded the Los Angeles School District to approve the most sweeping pullback on screen-time of any public K-12

system in the US Anya Meksin, the deputy director, says, "Cognitive skills are declining, attention spans are declining, executive functioning skills are declining."

Human brains don't work well by learning from screens.

All the research says one thing; why are the schools doing another?

Equivalent pushbacks are happening in Utah, Delaware, and New York. Similar mass action has happened in Madrid, where under-12s no longer learn on devices.

John McGee, director of education in Glasgow, recently binned a huge contract with a maths app in schools saying, "You can do the work on paper as well as you can on the app and you're just moving the teacher away from the child. That's no way to teach."

Denmark and Sweden are spending hundreds of millions on the re-introduction of textbooks. These countries and cities are the first fish swimming away from a misdirected shoal.

The data from the last fifteen years shows that as soon as devices entered the classroom, scores started plummeting around the world.

Of course that's when social media exploded into children's lives too, but social media, smartphones, and EdTech are all fins and teeth of the same shark. The social media design features deemed harmful enough to restrict for children — the streaks, the daily rewards, the endless notifications — are the very same features found in EdTech apps.

These are slot-machine tactics — the same unpredictable reward which keeps an adult scrolling now built into maths, languages, and even reading apps.

A 'reading app' — has there ever been a more oxymoronic phrase?

Will Ellis from Reclaim Childhood says, "These features do not appear in educational products because they improve learning. They appear because they improve engagement, and engagement is what the business model requires."

The distracting features are by no means the only downside.

Material read from a page in a book implants in the brain more profoundly than the exact same material read from a screen. We are physical beings, we must learn physically.

Reading from a page in a book — the feel of the paper, the design of the cover, the typeface, the smell of the pages, the spatial position of a phrase on the page — all of these things contribute to the holistic embodiment of learning. Reading on a screen is both immaterial and a-spatial. What you're reading right now is in exactly the same place as what you were reading five minutes ago, thirty minutes ago, yesterday. It's flat, it's un-impactful, the information won't stick.

The neuroscientist Dr. Jared Cooney Horvath explains how, after learning something, the brain needs a spell of downtime, rather like a digestion period. Calm, book-based learning provides this as a matter of course but there is no downtime with screen-based learning for the simple fact that screens are stimulating in and of themselves.

The neuroscientist Audrey van der Meer has spent the last twenty years charting the neurological differences between handwriting and typing. Her meticulous scans show the whole network of the brain lit up like a Christmas tree during handwriting, and dark as a cellar during typing. The physical process of handwriting appears to trounce the ease of typing in every cognitive metric.

Handwriting is also slower than typing, meaning a student has to organize and prioritize what he's reading or listening to — a process rendered unnecessary by transcriptive touch-typing.

It is also personal. A child's handwriting connects him to the subject he's writing about, where a sterile typeface neutralizes the relationship before it's even begun.

The same is true of a teacher's handwriting on a piece of submitted work. Receiving personal, not robotically generated, feedback is essential for continued motivation.

Handwriting must return to center stage in the classroom.

It is not just the humanities which are better mastered on paper either. The legendary maths teacher Bill Hinkley has researched how working out maths problems on paper deepens mathematical understanding and confidence.

The educational researcher John Jerrim conducted a lengthy experiment which saw three thousand students take PISA tests in maths, science, and reading. Half the students conducted all their work on paper, half did all their work on a computer. The paper-based group scored twenty points higher — the equivalent of six months' extra schooling.

Randi Weingarten, President of the American Federation of Teachers, has said, "We need more paper and pencil, more hands-on learning and fewer screens." Hear, hear.

But what about the kids with special needs? I hear you cry.

Well, some technology is very helpful — a speech-generating device for a non-verbal child, an eye-tracker for a physically-impaired child, an audiobook for a blind child. But the few children who are genuinely helped by assistive EdTech should not determine how the majority learn.

There's also a question mark over whether tech actually

does help children with milder learning needs. The speech and language therapist Denise Champney has found that these children are often disempowered by classroom tech, rendered completely dependent on it when they should in fact be exercising the skills they find challenging.

This push for everything to be initially easier is seductive, but it can often make things ultimately harder.

Some teachers with the heft to go against the screen-based grain are doing so. The renowned social psychologist and author Jonathan Haidt banned his MBA students from using devices in his classes several years ago. He saw the laptops as "distraction machines": the entire world available just one click away. He also believed in the power of his students' eyes on him — the biological connection between teacher and student.

Stanford professor Jim Steyer also bans devices from his classes, teaching only with books. McGill Professor Adam Dube reports his colleagues going back to pen and paper "for everything."

Many tech giants send their own children to low-tech schools, aware that the most highly-prized human capital in the coming era will be the ability to think — deeply, knowledgeably, and originally; to be the best of what a human can be, not a pale imitation of AI. This is a pattern worth keeping an eye on.

A few years ago, based on a UNESCO report, I wrote an article predicting that elite schools around the world would soon turn their back on screen-based learning and return to books, and the poorer children would end up with digital slop. Sure enough, top schools like Winchester College are implementing a stringent "paper-first" policy while Britain's poorest children are given chatbot tutors.

EdTech was meant to bridge the attainment gap, but it sadly seems to be doing the opposite.

The beating heart of the teacher-pupil relationship is one of the most important factors in academic success. The encouragement provided by a bouncing avatar makes a mockery of that relationship.

As the writing teacher John Warner puts it, "personalized learning" programs would be more honestly sold as "depersonalized learning." A machine cannot be a mentor. It won't wonder how you're doing when you switch it off.

Children facing problems at home deserve more human contact in the classroom, not less.

Yes, this is expensive. But so is EdTech. It's a multibillion-pound business. Governments, districts, and councils have a duty to put their money in the right place — that place is human teachers, human examiners, and physical textbooks.

Where have all the textbooks gone? Bring them back.

So far, I have only spoken about the damaging tremor of EdTech. But now we are faced with the civilizational earthquake of AI.

In its best form, AI is a supremely high-functioning tool, creating whatever you might need from metaphorical scratch or sifting through gigabytes of information and organizing it into a cogent order.

This can be rather helpful if you're a time-pushed adult and you've learned the hard way; that is, how to read, think, analyze information, grasp a concept, then organize your thoughts about it.

But if you're a child, and you haven't been through that lengthy, fibrous, but ultimately joyful journey of learning how to do it yourself, then you've skipped a crucial part of cognitive development.

The behavioral economist Richard Thaler observed that humans tend to default to low effort choices. Hence the adoption of AI in schools feeling so naive: however many lectures you give teens on how to use AI responsibly — as an intellectual sparring partner rather than a second brain — the vast majority will choose the shortest route to getting the damn essay done.

This is a totally natural response. Teenagers will push boundaries and test adults' credulity and fallibility.

Why are we setting so many of these young learners up to fail?

Jessica Winter writes in The New Yorker, "With its prettifying intrusions and impatient, lurking presence, AI blocks a young person's natural, gradual progression towards cognitive maturity." This is a fragile process and one that is being interrupted. We don't say to parents of a baby, "Don't let him crawl, it's a useless phase."

With 80% of middle schools in America handing out Chromebooks with built-in AI offering prompts for spelling, editing, sentence structure, and more, the current system seems designed to skip the crawling phase, the arduous phase.

Immediate relief in exchange for long-term dependency seems to be AI's defining trade-off: an instant elevation of results, twinned with a long-term dwindling of capability.

Learning scientists at McGill question the AI mantra of "deploy now, test later."

Indeed, the tech world's "move fast and break things" philosophy — arguably necessary in the competitive fields of industry and defense — feels dangerous in the arena of education.

These systems are unpredictable, they hallucinate, they present fabrication as fact in a way no child could possibly unpick. They are built to keep users coming back, to tell them what they want to hear, qualities which would be deemed manipulative and inappropriate in a human teacher. Yet these are not teething problems to be patched in the next version. They are core properties of the technology.

At a recent convention in Oxford, the technology futurist James Poulter was asked what schools should be teaching their pupils to prepare for their future.

He replied, "Teach the subjects which form character. Classics, English, Languages, History, Philosophy. Skills can be acquired."

Tech consultant Emily Cherkin agrees that the best preparation for a digital future is an analogue education. Cherkin's motto is "Tech Ed, not EdTech," that is, learning how technology works in technology lessons and back to books for everything else.

Helpfully, most technology skills do not require an internet connection. Safer and greener. What's not to like?

On the green theme, many schools trumpet the virtue of removing books to save paper, but then hand out electricity-guzzling devices wired to water-thirsty data centers. A book, which can be read, re-read, and passed down until it falls apart, seems evangelically green in comparison.

I will conclude with a brief summary of the great polemic Amusing Ourselves to Death, in which Neil Postman weighed up two dystopias.

In 1984, Orwell prophesied that we would be overcome by an externally-imposed oppression.

In Huxley's Brave New World, no Big Brother is required to remove our autonomy, our maturity, our history: as he saw it, people would come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undid their capacity to think.

Orwell feared those who would ban books. Huxley feared there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one left who wanted to read one.

If we, as adults, choose to surrender our minds to technology, that's our choice. But we must not inflict that surrender on our children.

Let us give them knowledge, love, truth, and beauty. They deserve nothing less.

AI-assisted learning stumbles on the evidence

Daniel Buck, Anna Low, American Enterprise Institute, February 13, 2026

Five months after the launch of ChatGPT, Sal Khan, the founder of the online learning giant Khan Academy, predicted that, "We're at the cusp of using AI for probably the biggest positive transformation that education has ever seen." As of now, this appears to have been an aspirational proclamation made with little evidence.

In the history of education, such declarations are commonplace, and it comes as little surprise that a tech CEO sees promise in an innovative technology. For centuries, optimists—and those with vested financial interests in technological innovations—have touted the potential world-changing benefits of blackboards, erasable pencils, projectors, radio, television, cell phones, social media, computers, and plenty more. Without a doubt, technological advancements from air conditioning to the internet have transformed schools, which have in turn brought changes both positive (classrooms free from sweltering heat) and negative (screen addictions).

As an increasing number of corporations are investing in the advancement of AI, the evidence of this fluid technology on student learning has proven difficult to pin down. Will it revolutionize education as every child gets a personalized AI tutor, consequently boosting academic achievement? Or will it become a glorified machine widely used for cheating and one that minimizes thinking and thereby leads to cognitive atrophy?

A new behemoth report from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) analyzing the emergence of AI in education thus far seems to suggest that it might be a bit of both. According to the OECD analysis, generative AI (i.e., the machine-learning models in widespread use, like ChatGPT, Gemini, and Claude) can support knowledge acquisition for students by facilitating learning and improving creativity. Key word: "can." Emerging data highlighted in the report also point to several snags.

While available research suggests that access to generative AI can improve student performance—on practice problems, final exams, and essays, for example—this does not prove sustained improvements in student learning. For example, in one randomized experimental study comparing student writing with and without AI support, the ChatGPT-supported group showed greater improvements in scores on their writing, yet the return did not yield greater knowledge acquisition or transfer. Additionally, the AI-users exhibited a distinct reliance on the technology and, compared to the non-AI supported groups, "were less likely to engage in metacognitive activities," such as self-reflection.

In other words, improved performance on AI-assisted assignments does not necessarily translate to improved understanding. Using AI for writing may have created a better final product, but it didn't make students any better writers than if they'd completed their work without AI assistance and may have only taught them how to rely on the technology.

In another RCT, access to generative AI improved math performance during practice by 48 percent, but once those supports were removed and students took exams in a closed-book environment, students performed 17 percent worse than students who studied with just a textbook.

Outsourcing thinking to a chatbot may produce better scores on essays or exams, but only so long as students have access to it. Remove the tool and students can no longer perform at that level without the assist.

A similar dynamic plays out with simpler technologies. Little Johnny may perform better on a test with access to a calculator, but if those supports are removed and he doesn't know his times tables, then he has not actually learned the material. In the physical domain, an athlete could lift more if assisted by robotics, but that's no measure of their physical prowess. Worse, their muscular strength may even decrease over time, making it much more difficult to bench 200 when the robot isn't around.

When it comes to affective capacities such as creativity, the OECD report cites a study measuring how the use of a general-purpose LLM can enhance creativity and quality of writing. The group using generative AI outperformed those going it alone—with only their brains to rely on—in terms of both creativity and writing quality. (Importantly though, the ideas of AI users were not as "funny.")

Does this really mean AI is enhancing our creativity? Or are we just outsourcing it and receiving high marks? There's an important distinction.

The report details an interview with Ronald Beghetto, an Arizona State University professor who specializes in using AI to support creative processes. Beghetto explains that, to use generative AI effectively, one needs "a clear goal, prior content knowledge, and a sense of what you

want to build." If AI is ineffective in transferring domain-specific knowledge, and students using it lack the content knowledge and understanding to employ it well, that renders the tool essentially useless. An intuitive first step seems to be to teach students a curriculum rich in foundational knowledge and essential skills.

The report acknowledges that "beneficial effects of a support tool depend on whether and to what extent the tool can elicit conducive interaction patterns." Namely, researchers and educators should concern themselves with how learners use AI—the measurable effects on learning are simply not clear-cut.

The topline conclusion of the OECD authors is, "GenAI can support learning when guided by clear teaching principles," but the details of specific studies give cause for skepticism. In short, the current research is helpful, but frankly, the effects on student learning remain a grab-bag, with results contingent on a multitude of conditions.

Despite the mixed results, there has been a rapid uptick in teacher and student usage of AI. Many districts and schools have embraced the technology. Yet, the return on this investment when it comes to genuine learning and understanding is not uniform or conclusive. Moreover, there are real tradeoffs to consider. Will discussions with AI distort children's social skills? Will AI cultivate an overreliance on technology, extending beyond the classroom, and foster addiction-like behavioral symptoms as social media algorithms have?

Assuming students use it well (asking for feedback instead of writing a draft) still the question remains: Why not ask another knowledgeable human for feedback? Dare we suggest, a teacher? A peer? A parent? That approach has worked for a long time. At the very least, the report's indefinite conclusions related to student learning warrant a tap on the brakes of the AI hype-train.

Notes

This is a resource document for you to use.
Take notes, highlight, use as a text book.

How Big Tech Captured American Schools

Natasha Singer, adapted from Coding Kids: Big Tech's Battle to Remake Public Schools, The New York Times

One humid afternoon in the summer of 2025, representatives from Microsoft were waiting as some 200 teachers trooped into a conference hall in downtown Manhattan. The educators were there for a workshop on the school technology of the moment: artificial intelligence chatbots.

The Microsoft team gave a presentation on their Copilot chatbot and asked the teachers to practice using it for tasks like generating emails to parents and customizing lesson plans. Microsoft instructors also screened an A.I. explainer video that their Minecraft Education division had produced for children. The animated clip, based on the company's blockbuster world-building game, featured a cheerful narrator and a cute Minecraft duck. Even if some schoolchildren weren't old enough to use A.I., one of the Microsoft workshop leaders told the teachers in attendance, at least they could start learning about it.

As a journalist covering technology in schools, I had observed similar workshops for teachers and students that were funded or led by corporate giants like Amazon, Apple, Meta, OpenAI and Alphabet, the parent company of Google. Taking in this one, at the headquarters of the United Federation of Teachers, I was struck by how similar the sessions were to training I'd seen years earlier, while reporting on the health care industry: seminars for doctors, organized by pharmaceutical companies, that aimed to get physicians to prescribe the latest brand-name drugs.

"Industry funds what helps industry," Dr. Adriane Fugh-Berman, a pharmacology professor at Georgetown University Medical Center who studies drug industry influence on medicine, told me recently, as I was reporting a book about A.I. and computer science education in schools.

These workshops have upsides. Big Pharma seminars can be useful for keeping physicians up-to-date on the latest patient remedies, and Big Tech workshops can similarly help educators keep current on the newest software tools. But Silicon Valley's efforts to capture the attention of education professionals and provide student training materials can also double as marketing or indoctrination. They enable some of the most powerful corporations on the planet to spin rosy technology stories for administrators, teachers and students, giving them a sanitized view of industry practices and product risks.

Many parents would likely object if, say, Exxon Mobil wrote their children's environmental science curriculum. Or if Purdue Pharma trained their children's biology teachers. Yet, over the last decade, schools have often embraced the technology industry in similar ways with few questions asked.

Industry-sponsored teacher training is just one technique that Big Tech companies use to shape schools and promote their worldviews to students. In interviewing more than 100 education and tech industry figures for my book, and reviewing hundreds of school, government and corporate documents, it became clear that a handful of giants have used their money, their might and their mammoth platforms to influence nearly every step of the education supply chain.

The day after the Microsoft-led workshop in Manhattan, the American Federation of Teachers, a national union with 1.8 million members, made a major announcement. The union was starting an ambitious program to train teachers nationwide on A.I., with $23 million in funding from Microsoft, OpenAI and Anthropic.

Publicly, Randi Weingarten, the A.F.T. president, was bullish. In an interview at the time, she said the partnership would help educators learn to use chatbots "safely, wisely and ethically," while also getting them a seat at the table with behemoths like Microsoft and OpenAI as they developed and refined their A.I. products.

I pointed out to Ms. Weingarten that the union-industry deal might also present a fox-henhouse problem for schools. While her organization was calling for safeguards to protect children from A.I. risks, some trade groups representing Big Tech were working to block A.I. safety laws. She acknowledged the dissonance. "We are in it for the good of students and for the good of the country and for the good of families and to make sure educators actually play their rightful role," she said. "Some of the companies that we're engaged with are in it for profit. Those are two fundamentally different goals."

After Ms. Weingarten announced her union's deal with Big Tech companies, a few teachers and professors publicly warned that the spread of A.I. chatbots could undermine their profession, by outsourcing and automating core tasks like giving students feedback on their work. One of the more forceful educators was Lois Weiner, an education professor emerita at New Jersey City University and a retiree member of the U.F.T., who argued on Bluesky that the national union was selling out to corporate interests.

"This isn't an alliance," Ms. Weiner told me. "We aren't sitting at the table. We're the meal."

Consumer tech giants provide the essential scaffolding that schools run on. That means laptops and tablets; operating systems and device-tracking software; the apps students use to write essays and analyze data; the messaging platforms that connect students and teachers; and more. Some of these companies, including Google, Microsoft and Apple, have also used their status as classroom tech providers as

a springboard to influence how and what schoolchildren learn.

Tech companies finance national polls and research reports to help make products like A.I. chatbots, and courses like computer science, more urgent priorities for students and school districts. They advocate for new laws to require schools to teach industry-aligned subjects. They sit on committees that help shape learning standards for public school students. They supply or sponsor teacher training and free course materials for students. They fund the National PTA, teachers' unions and other prominent groups.

This playbook allows the companies to shape the American education system in ways that benefit them. Apple, for instance, offers a free Advanced Placement Computer Science curriculum that teaches high schoolers to code in Swift, its programming language for developing iPhone apps. Microsoft offers a competing curriculum: AP Computer Science Principles with Minecraft Education.

To some ears, the course names sound innocuous. But there is no Raytheon-branded AP Physics course, DuPont AP Chemistry course or Pfizer AP Biology course.

This story matters whether you want schools to center tech skills or are agnostic, because the recent learn-to-code craze and the growing push for A.I. in schools are not just about learning. Those trends are part of a larger exercise of Silicon Valley power. The public education system, hungry for resources to improve opportunities for students, has become an avenue for multitrillion-dollar companies to enact their agendas.

This development taps into fundamental questions about education that Americans have been arguing over for more than a century. What is the purpose of public schooling? Is it to raise critical, independent thinkers? Train students in the latest career skills? Help young people discover their passions? Serve the needs of the prevailing industry or emerging ones? Create knowledgeable and active participants in a democracy? Or all of the above?

In researching my book, I spoke to tech industry leaders who have helped drive significant changes in schools. Brad Smith, Microsoft's vice chair and president, told me the dynamic began because public schools often seemed ill-equipped to teach crucial modern subjects and prepare students for the ever-evolving demands of the job market. He also suggested I consider where schools might be without support from corporations like Microsoft.

"Philanthropy in the private sector is doing this work because the public sector has failed to do what it's supposed to do," Mr. Smith said. He allowed that the situation wasn't ideal. "It's filled the gap out of necessity," he said. "It's not the way we should want public education to work."

Maggie Johnson, the head of Google.org, the company's corporate giving arm, made similar arguments. She said that the company had provided free educational materials and training in subjects like coding and data analytics for millions of underserved students, including middle schoolers and those in rural areas.

It is possible for Big Tech's intentions in education to be both well-meaning and oriented toward long-term profit. How you feel about any one program depends on your broader views on the technology industry. Public sentiment on these companies has shifted profoundly, from a generally positive disposition in the 2000s and early 2010s to a growing distrust as the downsides of social media, compulsive screen use and corporate power became more apparent.

The tensions could be seen about a decade ago, in December 2017, when Google introduced free coding exercises for schools to use during Computer Science Education Week. The lessons were called "Create your own Google logo," and they taught students how to use simple coding blocks to make the letters in the company's logo change color, spin and bounce. The company already ran a wildly popular annual artwork contest, called Doodle for Google, for which tens of thousands of students created logos on different themes. Ms. Johnson said the Google lessons were a great way to get students excited about programming.

That was true. But the lessons also had the feel of brand-washing. At the time, journalists had begun reporting on how Google's YouTube Kids platform had shown inappropriate, lewd and violent content to children. Separately, the company had begun removing thousands of videos of children, which had been targeted by child predators, from YouTube. Making multicolored Google logos hop and pirouette was a distraction from those headlines.

Google became the dominant tech platform in U.S. schools, eclipsing Apple and Microsoft, in part by offering a convenient package: free apps like Gmail along with sturdy, low-cost laptops called Chromebooks. Last year, Chromebooks accounted for 59 percent of the mobile devices shipped to U.S. schools, according to Futuresource Consulting, a research firm.

The story of how Google came to conquer the classroom is a case study of the company's power. From modest beginnings, it created a mammoth interlocking ecosystem that can drive shifts in teaching and learning — and create customers for life.

A campaign called "Gone Google" from the early 2010s illustrates the company's marketing prowess. Google was just starting to convince universities and school districts to switch from costly legacy software to its free suite of apps. A 19-page marketing guide from Google described the offering as a "celebration of curiosity-fueled, technology-enabled learning" in which students could "learn together with affordable devices and familiar platforms." The company encouraged education leaders to promote their conversions, and soon, school districts around the country

began announcing that they had "Gone Google."

Google sold school leaders on a similarly feel-good argument for Chromebooks: The laptops would empower students and democratize learning. Schools in Kansas, Michigan, Missouri, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas and Wisconsin that bought Chromebooks all included variations of the same Googlesque sentence on their sites or student handbooks: "The individual use of Chromebooks is a way to empower students to maximize their full potential and prepare them for college and the workplace."

The schools' enthusiasm helped obscure a long-term Google goal: hooking students early on services like Gmail and Chrome. The real revenue, made from amassing consumers' data and showing ads based on their online activities, would come later.

Winning over schools and students with free apps was also a useful way for Google to curate and soften its image as regulators began to investigate the company's data practices. In 2019, for instance, Google agreed to pay $170 million to resolve complaints by regulators who said YouTube had illegally harvested children's personal data and used the details to target them with ads.

Since then, millions of schoolchildren have tried colorful animated lessons from Google called "Be Internet Awesome." The program aims to teach students how to keep their data private and be kind online — and positions Google as a friendly, trustworthy privacy protector.

Schools have spent tens of billions of dollars on classroom technology products over the last decade. Yet laptops and learning apps have generally not proven to significantly improve students' educational outcomes. Some parents and school leaders who feel the industry oversold them on devices have soured on screens in schools, a phenomenon I've come to call Chromebook remorse.

Some schools have now started limiting classroom laptop use. This year, the Los Angeles Unified School District, the second-largest U.S. public school system, agreed to eliminate the use of school-issued iPads and Chromebooks for students in prekindergarten through first grade.

"Ten years ago, we bought the narrative from the tech companies that the only way to prepare our students for the future was to hand each of them a Chromebook or an iPad," Lila Byock, the founder of a parent group called Schools Beyond Screens, said at a recent Los Angeles school board meeting. "Now we know better."

Even Ms. Weingarten, who touted her union's deal with Microsoft and OpenAI to train teachers on chatbots in 2025, has partially reversed course, in line with the rapidly changing politics of A.I. This year, she publicly called for elementary schools to hold off using A.I. with students.

One revealing story about Silicon Valley's sincerity in the classroom involves the push to teach children coding.

In 2011, Eric Schmidt, then the executive chairman of Google, delivered a lecture in Scotland in which he excoriated British schools for failing to teach computer science, the study of programming and concepts like algorithms. Britain would not be able to compete globally, he suggested, if more kids did not learn to code.

A year later, Microsoft issued a similar public admonition for the United States: Tech companies could not find enough talented software engineers to maintain their explosive growth — a hiring shortage that threatened the American economy. Microsoft said the problem was that too few high schools taught computing.

The message took off in 2013, when a nonprofit called Code.org posted a YouTube video, starring Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg, that promoted coding as an empowering, lucrative skill for students. "Our policy is literally to hire as many talented engineers as we can find," Mr. Zuckerberg said in the video. "The whole limit in the system is that there just aren't enough people who are trained and have these skills today."

The video went viral, kicking off a nationwide learn-to-code drive in schools. With funding and expertise from Microsoft and Google, Code.org helped convince dozens of states to enact new laws and policies boosting computer science in public schools. The courses had positive effects, teaching students important skills like logic, abstraction and problem-solving. But some also cast tech giants as benevolent, world-changing innovators — often without pushing students to consider the industry's consequences and harms.

"In other disciplines, we don't have industry driving K-12 curricular or policy decisions," Bryan Twarek, a vice president at the Computer Science Teachers Association, a nonprofit group with nearly 10,000 teachers as members, told me. "And we probably shouldn't." His candor seemed startling, given that the group's biggest donors include Amazon, Google and Microsoft.

Big Tech needed an army of coders — until it didn't. Software engineers are increasingly turning to A.I. tools to generate code. So are many other people with no prior coding experience. Companies like Amazon, Google, Meta and Microsoft are pouring billions into building enormous data centers to fuel A.I. services, even as they lay off thousands of employees. Some recent college graduates who majored in computing are struggling to find tech jobs.

Now some of the same corporations that sold schools on computer science are pushing them to teach A.I. and investing billions of dollars in the effort. And tellingly, this year, Code.org changed its name to CodeAI.

But something different is happening this time in schools: pushback. A groundswell of teachers, parents, researchers and local government leaders say they aren't buying the

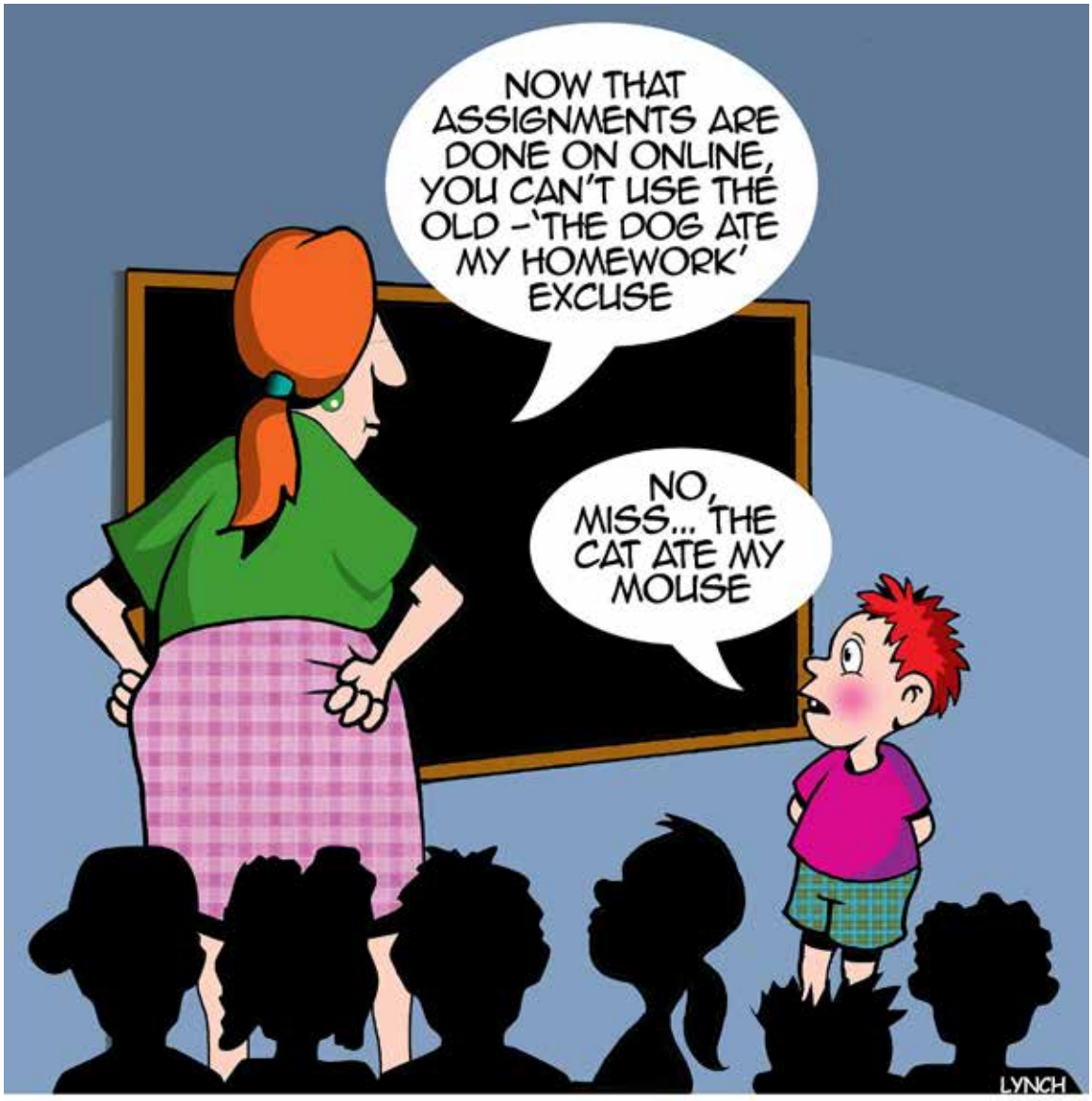
idea of new, and educationally unproven, A.I. tools as the next fulcrum for learning.

Some are embracing a broader approach to tech education, one that not only teaches algorithms and app-making, but also asks students to examine how individuals and society are affected by the industry's disruptions. To see this strategy in person, I visited Alicia Streight, a math teacher at Edna Brewer Middle School in Oakland, Calif. In addition to teaching traditional topics, Ms. Streight asks her students to analyze how social media influencers manipulate statistics to spread disinformation.

A few years ago, she also started a weekly class to encourage middle schoolers to examine all kinds of innovations in their lives: TikTok, meat substitutes, ChatGPT. She helped her students consider questions like: "Where did this come from? Who's building this? Who's profiting? Who's benefiting? How is this going to affect me? How's this going to affect my family? What's going to happen in 10 years?"

Rather than being coded by industry, Ms. Streight's students were learning to decode popular products and ask fundamental questions about the powerful companies behind them. With A.I. spreading at astonishing speed, Ms. Streight argues that it's more imperative than ever to give students durable analytical skills.

Educators have come up with a term for this pedagogical approach: "technology civics." After all, public schools have long taught civics as an essential subject for students to understand and navigate government power in their lives. The new discipline will help them understand and navigate Big Tech, and equip them for a world increasingly shaped by machines.



Meet 'Bob': The AI robot inside an Oklahoma classroom

Tatum Guinn, News On 6, April 7, 2026

Students at Chouteau Middle School have a unique teacher's aide. "Bob" is an M2 robot capable of analyzing what happens in a classroom.

"They were like, 'Let's name it Bob.' I said, 'Why?' 'Oh, because it's a cool name, I guess.' And it just stuck," said teacher Matthew Bendure.

Though students may joke with "Bob," the robot's real strength lies in its data-driven insights. It monitors lessons in real time, tracking participation and summarizing key takeaways.

That capability is what first caught the attention of Principal Michelle Brumley.

"We're getting student feedback, we're getting teacher feedback, we're getting lesson summaries," Brumley said. "It's giving us a total overview of everything that's happening in that classroom."

The robot has spent most of the school year assisting Bendure, aside from a brief hiatus that students marked in an unusual way.

"We had a funeral for Bob. I had a kid write a eulogy for it," Bendure said.

The company that created the robot was touched by the gesture and returned it to the classroom. Since then, "Bob" has become a permanent fixture — and a valuable teaching tool.

Bendure said the technology has changed how he approaches instruction.

"A lot of the guesswork of, 'Are my students getting it?' or 'Is what I'm saying making sense?' — the robot takes that questioning out," he said.

Teachers upload their curriculum and lesson plans into the system. From there, the M2 robot follows along, monitors engagement and can generate examples, ask questions and highlight key points.

At the end of each lesson, students log on to their computers and interact one-on-one with the program, allowing for more candid feedback.

"It allows the kids to be open and honest without fear of disappointment or rejection or judgment coming from anybody else," Bendure said.

The system helps identify which students are grasping the material and which may need extra support.



"It's able to bridge that gap and help those students while not replacing you," Bendure said. "Without me, it's nothing. It has to have a teacher. It has to have that human interaction in order to build off what you say — to support you, not replace you."

The technology also provides feedback to teachers on their own performance, offering insights that can help refine instruction.

School leaders have been so impressed that they are expanding the program. Brumley said the school plans to use grant funding to purchase five more robots.

"We are using the benefits of AI in a controlled setting," she said.

Brumley added that integrating technology like this is essential for preparing students for the future.

"It's not going anywhere, and we aren't doing our students a service if we are not incorporating it and teaching them the proper way to use the tools that are available," she said.

Unlike platforms such as ChatGPT, the M2 robots do not pull information from the internet. Instead, they rely solely on lesson plans and curriculum uploaded by teachers or the district, ensuring that all content remains aligned with classroom instruction.

Access the video version of this story atat https://www.news9.com/ooo/educate-oklahoma/meet-bob-the-ai-robot-inside-an-oklahoma-classroom .

Power of Change when K-12 and Business Collaborate

Kelli List Wells, Founder of the STEM Leadership Alliance

I have been reflecting on the changes that have occurred in education over the last decade. In my previous role, as executive director of education and skills within a multinational company, I was in the center of various reforms. I observed there is a disconnect between K-12 and business that is impacting the future of work. Reform in K-12 is a long process, and the business community can be an incredible partner if they are willing to partner for the long run. I am constantly amazed at the demands within a school and a system that come from students, parents, boards, politicians, businesses, etc, it can be overwhelming. What schools and districts need is for corporate partners to support their existing work. One of the most important ways is supporting professional development. This can be difficult for companies to understand, but educators need learning opportunities to manage the constant daily demands they face. This includes deepening their understanding of English Language Arts (ELA) and math standards, and now the new Next Generation Science Standards. Educators need support to incorporate these standards into their curriculum and we cannot forget the need to address the critical or essential skills that are necessary for the workforce of today and tomorrow.

Educators need to focus on the instructional core (curriculum and pedagogy), which involves breaking down the silos in teaching and allowing students to understand how the subjects connect so they become the critical thinkers, problem solvers, and innovators that own their learning. Whether a teacher teaches a particular content area or if they are teaching all subjects, the subjects are being taught in an isolated manner. This is not how the world works. We like to compartmentalize things, not just content areas. We want to work around the core system through after school programs or other opportunities. These programs are essential but until we address the core, we will not make the essential changes that are needed within the K12 system to impact the future workplace.

It is time for corporations to support K-12 systems that support educators with their practice. Curriculum alone is not the answer. Out of school activities must occur but we need to find connections so ALL students benefit. That is why professional development is essential. I am talking about the kind of professional learning that builds the capacity of the teacher by deepening their conceptual understanding of how to integrate across the content areas. Professional development and curriculum that is prescriptive will not close the gap alone.

However, professional learning that is authentic, meaningful and purposeful and curriculum that is modified to meet the needs of the learners across all content areas, will indeed close the achievement gap. It is when we realize that each person is unique and therefore, delivery of instruction must fit the individual but also the students the teacher is with. Teachers know their students best and no one from the outside can think they know better. The teacher knows which students did not have breakfast, which students had a rough night; the teacher hears and sees it all.

And regardless, if we like it or not students are tested on literacy and numeracy. If you cannot read or write, all the Project-Based Learning, maker spaces, essential skills, out of school programs, are not going to help students be successful in life. It is when all of this comes together in an integrated way that the transformation begins, that is why I am passionate about integrated STEM. STEM, however, has been used as an acronym. I have heard everything from a STEM project to a STEM degree. And when you ask parents, students, or people in the community, often they do not know what STEM is, it is equated to robotics or an iPhone. And if they discuss a STEM project, it is just another activity because it is not explained how the science, math, engineering, and technology weave together using literacy as the anchor.

The amount of money that has been spent on these projects has not shown the results of closing the achievement gap for students. Integrated STEM is not just another buzz word and it is not just about Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math, it is about how to use science as the hook for the students and then to bring in the numeracy and literacy. Science is complex, think of the literacy and numeracy skills that can be developed using science. Then take it to the next level, the history of how the world works, social studies and history must be a part of the conversation, we learn from the past to build the future. Technology is more than a computer or an iPhone. It is closer to literacy skills when you think about coding and understanding the language behind computer skills. And engineering is design thinking, it is a process that allows for design, measuring/testing results, analyzing results, improving and reviewing, this cycle can be seen in everything from cooking to designing the next rocket for space. The crux of integrated STEM is for students to understand the connection among subjects and that they are involved and own their learning because they can understand the relevance of what they are learning in the classroom and applying it to the real world.

The STEM Leadership Alliance was formed to be the connective tissue between the PreK-12 pipeline, both formal and informal education, and industry to promote STEM literacy and careers, and address anticipated skills gaps. The mission of the Alliance is not duplicative of any existing organization. The Alliance is a new, groundbreaking, approach that brings innovation and collaboration to a new level, breaking down walls in districts and schools and bringing organizations – along with businesses that support them – together with shared accountability.

Opinion: Why does public education require public schools?

Karen Pittman, Youth Today, July 26, 2023

"Public education is the most important investment America makes in its future, a tangible expression of our values and aspirations for society. Schools profoundly influence how students understand themselves, the roles and responsibilities they are expected to fulfill, and the country they will collectively create. A vision for public education is an essential touchstone for aligning strategies and actions to purpose and mission."

This quote is the opening paragraph of "We Are What We Teach," a nine-page call to action and vision statement from the Aspen Institute's Education & Society Program. It is well worth the read. The team doesn't pull punches. They cite two crises, a crisis of belonging and a crisis of opportunity, as two of the most important reasons we need a new vision of public education. They propose three succinct, balanced purposes for public education that highlight the outdatedness of the current standards, assessments, and accountability framework: Developing a sense of self, preparing for American democracy and civic life, and preparing for the world of work.

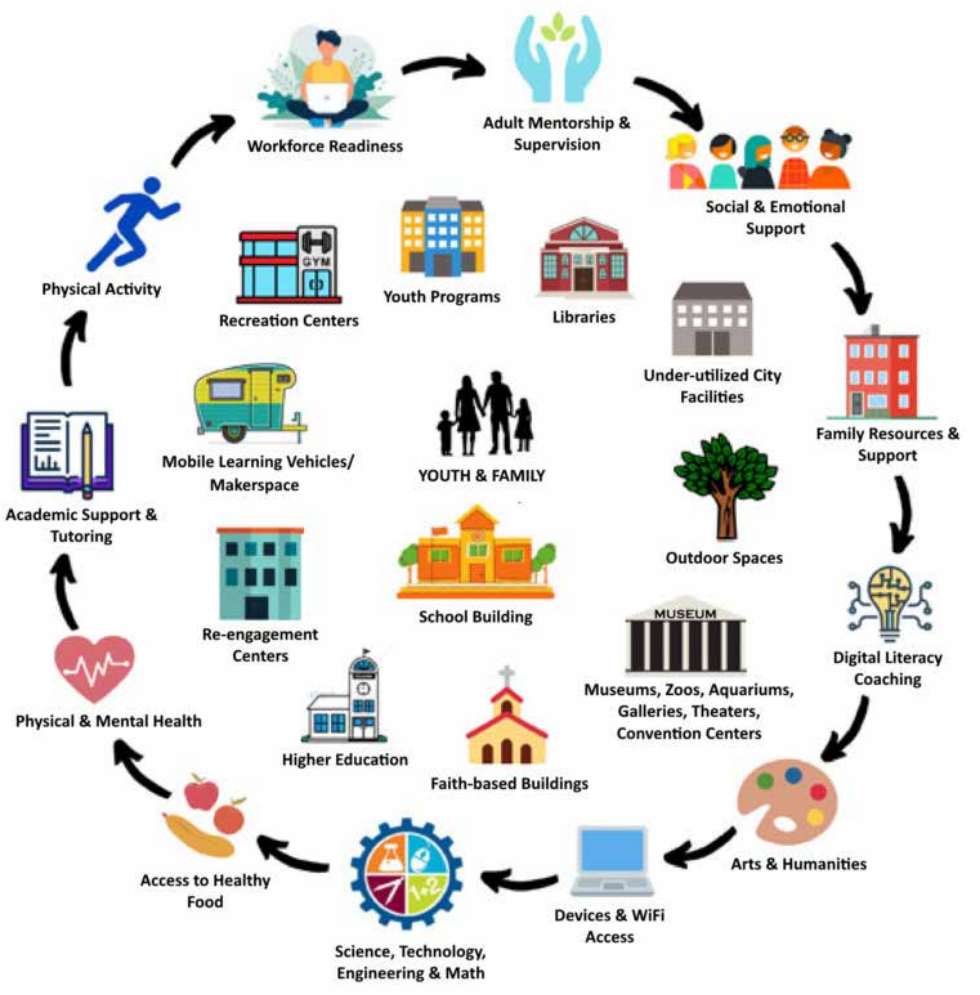
They acknowledge the need to be more explicit about the role of education in relation to other policies, investments, and social structures and to clarify education's role relative to other important factors that influence life outcomes. They appropriately note the expanded roles schools took on during the pandemic to lead on public health, technology infrastructure, and the provision of safety-net services. Their conclusion: "This level of primary responsibility is unsustainable over the long-term and needs to be right-sized relative to the essential roles of other agencies and partners."

I agree. But I am not just concerned about the unsustainability associated with schools taking on public health and basic services roles. I am equally concerned about the unsustainability associated with schools not sharing responsibility for ensuring the types of educational experiences that develop a strong, integrated sense of self and draw learners into their roles as citizens and workers. The agencies and partners essential for the first goal are different from those who contribute to the second.

During the pandemic, the National League of Cities proposed a "community learning hubs" model to help city leaders understand the range of services, supports and opportunities young people need and the range of places they might receive them beyond schools. They argued that communities that collaborate, align programs and resources, and center their work in equity will be better positioned to bounce back from the pandemic and see longer-term education, health, and economic gains.

The National League of Cities report proposed that the community learning hubs model has five benefits that can help right-size the role of schools while also increasing efficiency and equity:

- Collect data to determine neighborhood-specific needs



This National League of Cities diagram suggests a broader, bolder goal.

- Leverage local facilities, staff expertise and community resources
- Prioritize health and safety concerns
- Address systemic inequities
- Provide comprehensive wraparound supports

NLC's diagram, however, suggests a broader, bolder goal: community-centered learning and development:

The outer ring of icons depicts includes more than the health, technology, and support services that stretched schools to thin during the pandemic. The ring includes arts and humanities, STEM, physical activity and adult mentors. It represents the full range of services, supports and opportunities young people need to be productive, healthy and connected. It includes the basic services some learners need without deemphasizing the supports and opportunities all need.

The inner ring of icons depicts the physical places where these services, supports and opportunities could be delivered. Health clinics, food pantries and social service agencies are important for ensuring equitable access to learning opportunities. But they are not included in the model because they are not primary places in the community where learning happens.

The school building and families are at the center of the visual because these are the places formally charged with ensuring that each and every learner builds the competencies, confidence and connections they need to be ready to participate fully in family, work and civic life. Many schools naturally integrate the outer ring functions into the day to ensure that the core academic content is not only rigorous, but relevant, well-received and authentically utilized. None, however, are as important as what the XQ Institute calls proficiency in functional literacies and foundational knowledge.

Executed too forcefully or separately from core instruction, even functions like social and emotional development and mentoring can be perceived as undermining the mission of schools given their sole responsibility for academic teaching and learning. So how can we help schools right-sizing from the pandemic look for opportunities to assess and adjust their roles in providing all of these functions? Four quick suggestions:

- Assume that every function is seen as the primary responsibility of at least one other institution.
- Assume that families relate to these other institutions as much as, or even more than, they relate to schools.
- Assume that the other places connect with each other as much as, or even more than, they connect to schools.
- Reflect on the new connections that flourished, albeit unevenly, when school buildings closed at the beginning of the pandemic. Assess how they could be nurtured or why they weren't continued.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development recently issued a report outlining four scenarios for the future of learning:

- **Schooling extended** (continued reliance on academic certificates from accredited institutions)
- **Education outsourced** (diverse forms of private and community-based alternatives to schooling)
- **Schools as learning hubs** (schools retain most functions, but competency recognition drives ecosystem development, leveraging resources from other institutions)
- **Learn-as-you-go** (digitalized, AI driven learning that allows knowledge, skills and attitudes to be assessed and certified directly).

All four are possible. As I see it, however, only the learning hubs model has the potential to be not only efficient, but also effective and equitable.

Karen Pittman is a partner at KP Catalysts and the founder and former CEO of the Forum for Youth Investment.

Key Practices of Community Schools

Learning Policy Institute

What is a community school?

Community schools enable educators, families, students, and community partners to work together to support students' learning and development. In collaboration, they organize in- and out-of-school resources, such as health care, mental health services, meals, tutoring, after-school and summer programs, internships, and other learning and career opportunities that are tailored to the goals and needs of their students and families. They also cultivate a welcoming and safe school environment and provide instruction that invites students' multifaceted identities and backgrounds into the classroom to support rich and inclusive learning.

Community schools work with community partners and a full-time, school-based coordinator. Members of this extended school community set a shared vision and make collaborative decisions about how to strengthen and improve student and school outcomes.

Although community schools have been around for more than a century, modern community schools — designed around whole child structures and practices — have been gaining momentum in recent years, supported by increases in state and federal funding and their ability to pivot and respond to family needs more quickly during the pandemic.

Nationally representative survey data suggest that 45%–60% of schools offer some form of wraparound services (e.g., mental or physical health care), a subset of which are directly implementing the community schools strategy. At this time, over 30 states have community schools work underway in some form (e.g., proposed legislation, local initiatives), while at least 8 states are directly funding community schools.

What are the key practices of community schools?

Community schools design a strategy to meet the needs and assets of their school and surrounding community, leading to a unique combination of programs and services at each site. Implementation is frequently organized around common school-level practices. In a 2017 research review, LPI identified four pillars as the most prevalent practices in effective community schools: integrated student supports, expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities, active family and community engagement, and collaborative leadership and practices. In subsequent years, these four pillars were adopted in several states and by the federal government's Full-Service Community Schools grant program.

As more research has emerged, the four pillars have been expanded to include two more features that have proved central to effective community schools: a culture of belonging, safety, and care; and rigorous, community-connected instruction. These six interconnected practices of community schools were codified in the Essentials for Community Schools Transformation framework to help policymakers and practitioners align around a research- and practice based conception of community schools. This work was led by a national collaboration called Community Schools Forward — including the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution, the Children's Aid National Center for Community Schools, the Coalition for Community Schools at the Institute for Educational Leadership, and the Learning Policy Institute—that engaged with more than 700 practitioners, researchers, policymakers, and community pners to inform the Essentials development.

As the Essentials framework shows, these key practices are most effectively implemented when members of the school community have a shared vision and trusting relationships and are engaged in data-informed, inclusive decision-making. Systems-level support — including professional learning and sustainable resources — also contributes to effective implementation.

A Framework for Community Schools

The community schools strategy transforms a school into a place where educators, local community members, families, and students work together to strengthen conditions for student learning and healthy development. As partners, they organize in- and out-of-school resources, supports, and opportunities so that young people thrive



Source: Community Schools Forward. (2023).

Key Practices for Community Schools Transformation

Expanded and enriched learning opportunities

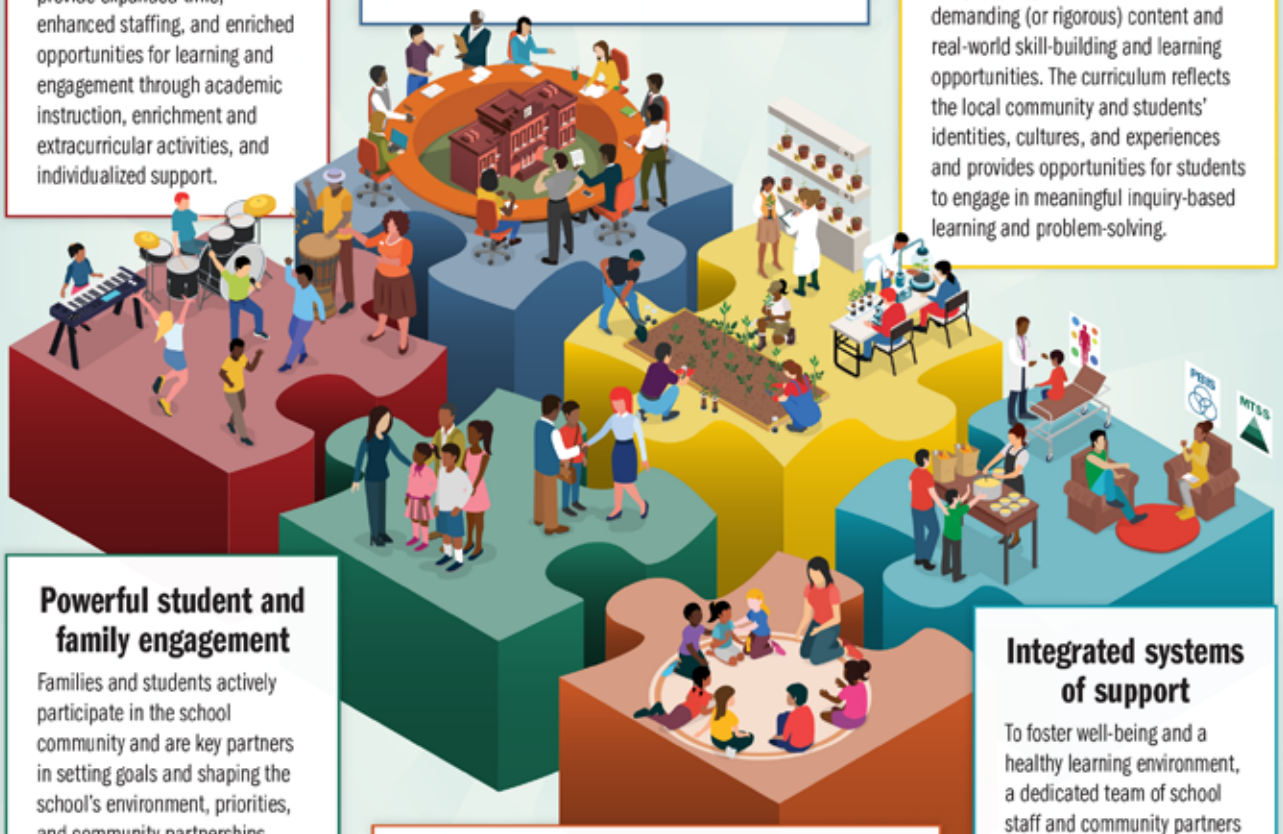
Before- and after-school, weekend, and summer programs provide expanded time, enhanced staffing, and enriched opportunities for learning and engagement through academic instruction, enrichment and extracurricular activities, and individualized support.

Collaborative leadership, shared power and voice

Families, students, teachers, principals, and community partners co-create a culture of professional learning, collective trust, and shared ownership as they make decisions together through formal structures and through more informal engagement.

Rigorous, community-connected classroom instruction

Teaching and learning in the school integrates high-quality instruction with demanding (or rigorous) content and real-world skill-building and learning opportunities. The curriculum reflects the local community and students' identities, cultures, and experiences and provides opportunities for students to engage in meaningful inquiry-based learning and problem-solving.



Powerful student and family engagement

Families and students actively participate in the school community and are key partners in setting goals and shaping the school's environment, priorities, and community partnerships. Schools become hubs providing opportunities for adults and young people.

Integrated systems of support

To foster well-being and a healthy learning environment, a dedicated team of school staff and community partners employ a systemic, assets-based approach to coordinate services, supports, and opportunities.

Culture of belonging, safety, and care

School staff work with students, families, and partners to cultivate a welcoming climate that fosters trust and healthy relationships. Each person in the school community finds value in a rich diversity of experiences and feels encouraged to share their own views, knowledge, and culture.

Access the Community Schools Forward Framework

https://bit.ly/4f5JyrP

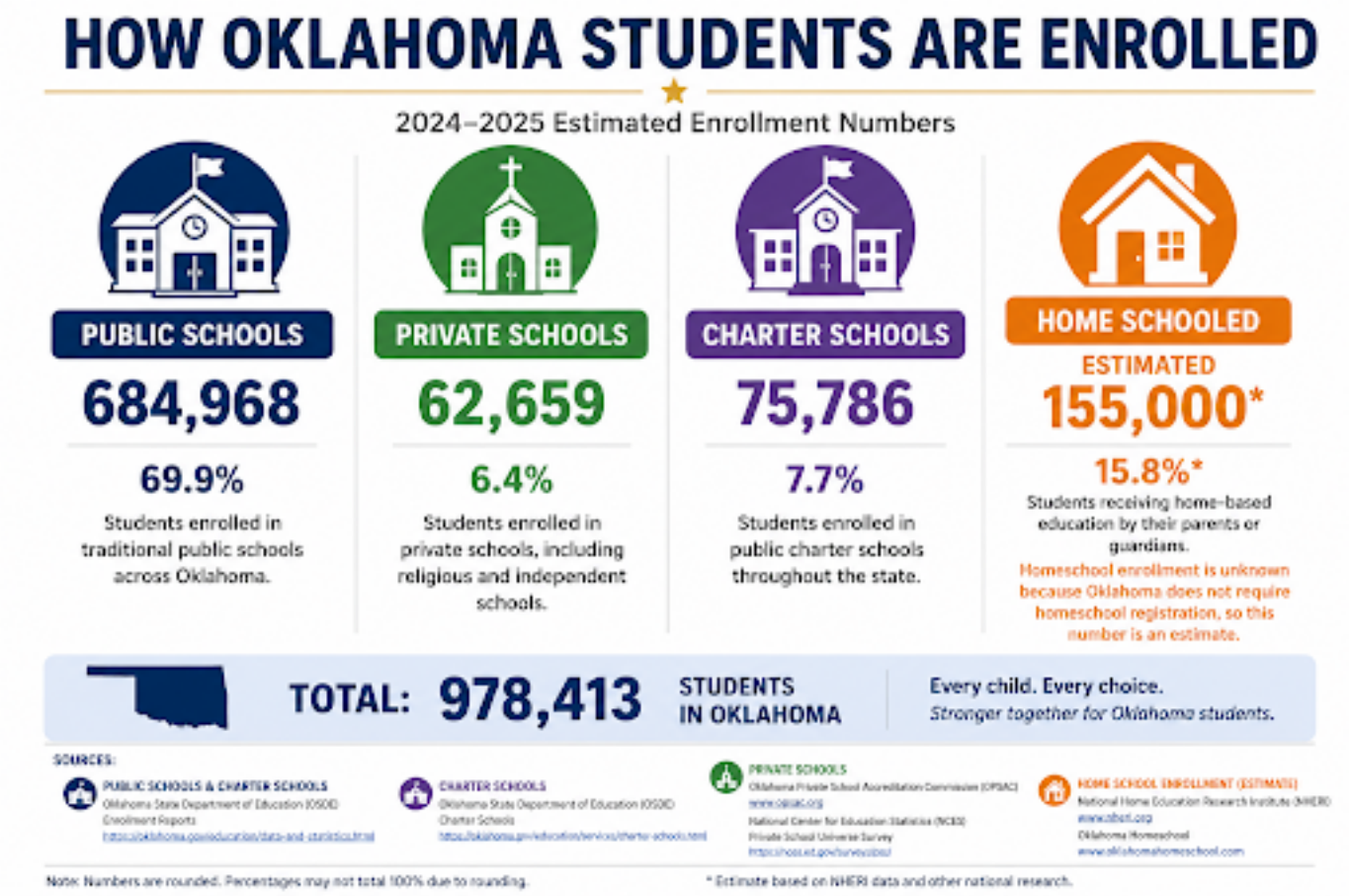
About this infographic

These key practices are drawn from the Community Schools Forward Framework, informed by both research and practice. The framework shows the integrated nature of the key practices and emphasizes the enabling conditions (i.e., trusting relationships, inclusive decision-making, a shared vision, and actionable data) and supportive infrastructure that must be in place for effective implementation.

LearningPolicyInstitute.org

Why Private Schools Matter in Oklahoma

Jessica Thompson, M.S. Ed., STEM Educator



When discussing education in Oklahoma, public schools are often the primary focus. However, private schools also play an important role in educating students across the state by providing families with educational choices that may better meet the unique needs of their children (Oklahoma State Department of Education [OSDE], n.d.). Whether a family seeks a faith-based education, specialized academic programs, smaller class sizes, or a learning environment tailored to a child's strengths, private schools help ensure that Oklahoma students have access to a variety of educational opportunities.

If parents are recognized as the primary educators of their children, it follows that they are often in the best position to determine which educational setting will help their child succeed. Every child learns differently, and no single educational model works equally well for every student. While Oklahoma's public schools serve the vast majority of students, there are circumstances in which the local public school may not offer the programs or services that best fit an individual child. Some students require specialized support for learning differences or disabilities, while others need advanced academic opportunities or specialized programs in areas such as science, engineering, the arts, or career and technical education that may not be available locally. For these families, private schools and parochial schools provide another pathway to help each child reach his or her full potential.

Private schools themselves are diverse. Some are independent institutions, while others are parochial schools affiliated with a particular church or parish. Many Catholic schools, for example, are sponsored by a local parish or diocese and integrate faith formation with academic excellence (National Catholic Educational Association [NCEA], 2024). Other private schools may emphasize college preparation, classical education, Montessori methods, or specialized learning approaches. This variety allows parents to select an educational environment that aligns with both their child's educational needs and their family's values. Many people assume that private schools receive substantial government funding, but that is generally not the case.

While private and parochial schools may receive some

federal funding through various Title Funds, such as Title I, II, and IV, these funds are provided to the local districts and disbursed through the local school district. For instance, some private schools in the Oklahoma City Metro may receive these federal Title Funds from the Oklahoma City Public School District. To be clear, there is no actual transfer of money. Instead, services and product-based items are provided on an equitable allocation. The services or products purchased can include professional development services or the purchase of items such as technology that benefits those Title students. This prevents entanglement of monies. The primary funding source for all private schools in Oklahoma is generated through one of three primary funding sources: tuition, charitable donations, and endowments.

Tuition provides the largest share of a private school's operating budget. As with most schools, personnel costs are the largest operating expense. Nationally, private schools typically devote approximately 75% to 90% of their operating budgets to faculty and staff salaries and benefits (National Association of Independent Schools [NAIS], 2024). The remaining tuition revenue supports non-staff items such as instructional materials, utilities, technology, facility maintenance, transportation, insurance, and other operating costs. The second source of funding is charitable giving. Donations from individuals, families, alumni, businesses, churches, and foundations are essential to many private schools. Some gifts are unrestricted and allow school leaders to address the areas of greatest need. Others are designated for specific purposes, such as purchasing science laboratory equipment, expanding robotics or fine arts programs, providing student scholarships, renovating classrooms, or constructing new facilities such as auditoriums, athletic complexes, or academic buildings.

A third source of financial support comes from endowments. Endowment funds are invested to provide long-term financial stability for a school. Typically, the principal remains invested while only a portion of the investment earnings is used each year. Many endowments are established for designated purposes, such as scholarships, faculty development, or the maintenance of specific academic programs, ensuring that donors' intentions continue to benefit future generations of students (NAIS, 2024). While endowments can be a source of revenue for schools, not all private or parochial schools have endowments.

It is also important to understand that families choosing private education continue to support public education through their taxes. Property taxes and other state and local taxes paid by these families help fund Oklahoma's public schools, even though their children attend private schools. In addition to paying those taxes, private school families pay tuition, meaning they voluntarily bear the cost of their child's education while also contributing to the public education system.

Oklahoma's Parental Choice Tax Credit is also frequently misunderstood. The tax credit is designed to help eligible families offset the cost of private school tuition and fees. It is not a direct appropriation to private schools. Rather, eligible parents apply through the Oklahoma Tax Commission, and once approved, the tax credit is issued through a payment process that is applied toward the student's tuition obligation at the participating private school (Oklahoma Tax Commission [OTC], 2026). Typically, the process involves the tax credit payment being sent to the eligible school in the parent's name. The parents are then responsible for contacting the school and getting the payment processed. The purpose of the program is to assist families in accessing the educational environment they believe best serves their child.

Ultimately, the purpose of private education is not to replace public education but to complement it by providing additional educational options for Oklahoma families. Every child has unique gifts, interests, and learning needs, and every community benefits when families have the ability to choose the educational environment where their children can thrive. Whether through public schools, charter schools, homeschooling, or private schools, expanding educational opportunities strengthens Oklahoma by helping every child receive the education that best prepares them for a successful future (OSDE, n.d.).

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Homeschooling in Oklahoma: Educational Freedom, Accountability, and Outcomes

Homeschool Oklahoma (HSOK)

Introduction

Homeschooling has been a lawful and thriving educational pathway in Oklahoma for decades. Protected under the Oklahoma Constitution Article XIII, Section 4, home education reflects the deeply held belief that parents bear primary responsibility for the education and formation of their children.

Homeschool Oklahoma (HSOK) serves families statewide by providing support networks, leadership development, and advocacy. Our mission is to protect educational freedom while equipping families to pursue excellence in education.

As policymakers consider how to improve outcomes for all Oklahoma students, it is essential to understand that homeschoolers are already contributing meaningfully to the educational landscape—without drawing from public school funding streams.

Constitutional Foundation

Oklahoma recognizes homeschooling as a constitutionally protected educational option under parental authority. This framework:

- Preserves educational pluralism
- Protects parental rights
- Avoids unnecessary regulatory burdens
- Encourages innovation and customization

Importantly, Oklahoma homeschool families operate independently of state funding and the institutional accountability structures designed for public systems.

Educational Outcomes

A substantial body of national research indicates that homeschooled students perform at or above national averages on academic measures:

- Standardized Testing: Research compiled by the National Home Education Research Institute (NHERI) reports homeschool students typically score 15–25 percentile points above public school averages on standardized academic achievement tests (Ray, 2017; 2021).
- College Performance: Studies summarized by NHERI and independent researchers indicate homeschool graduates perform as well as or better than their peers in college GPA and persistence (Cogan, 2010; Snyder, 2013).
- Civic Engagement: The Cardus Education Survey (2011; 2018) found that graduates of home education demonstrate high levels of civic participation and community engagement comparable to or exceeding other educational sectors.

While Oklahoma does not centrally collect homeschool performance data (consistent with constitutional protections), anecdotal and institutional evidence shows homeschool graduates entering:

- Public and private universities
- Military service
- Trade and technical fields
- Entrepreneurship and family businesses
- The individualized nature of homeschooling allows students to advance at their own pace—accelerating in strengths and receiving targeted intervention where needed.

Formational Outcomes

Homeschooling offers outcomes that are difficult to replicate in institutionalized settings. Homeschooling families often focus on formational aspects of education, such as:

- Character development
- Beauty appreciation
- Development of moral intuition
- Establishment of habits and practices
- Integration of community needs into daily living
- Development of familial and community relationships
- Development of spiritual practices and beliefs
- These formational outcomes often do more to prepare a student for life success than the educational outcomes. However, they are necessarily absent from mass schooling efforts because of the lack of societal agreement on the content of such formation. Homeschooling allows for a clean integration of formational and educational practices across the curriculum.

Formational outcomes are almost entirely excluded from mainstream educational practices, even in private schools. Occasionally lip service is paid to such practices, but home education is the best means of providing these. Additionally, it is clear from the content of these items that they would be inappropriate to fund with state dollars.

Innovation and Flexibility

Homeschooling offers structural advantages that are difficult to replicate in institutional settings:

- One-on-one or small-group instruction
- Customized curriculum selection
- Flexible scheduling
- Integration of apprenticeships, internships, and dual enrollment
- Immediate parental responsiveness to academic or social challenges

Many Oklahoma families collaborate through co-ops, tutorials, hybrid models, microschools, and extracurricular partnerships—demonstrating organic innovation without centralized mandates.

Accountability

Homeschool accountability operates differently than public school accountability models.

Parents are directly accountable for:

- Curriculum choices
- Instructional quality
- Student progress
- Graduation requirements

Families voluntarily utilize standardized testing, ACT/SAT exams, concurrent enrollment transcripts, and portfolio documentation when needed for postsecondary transitions. This accountability structure is relational, immediate, and individualized—rather than bureaucratic.

Contribution to Oklahoma's Educational Ecosystem

Homeschooling contributes to Oklahoma education in several measurable ways:

1. Reduces strain on public school infrastructure
2. Operates without per-pupil public expenditure
3. Produces graduates who enter higher education and workforce sectors
4. Encourages high parental involvement in student learning

A healthy educational ecosystem includes public schools, private schools, charter schools, and homeschools—each serving families with different needs.

Policy Considerations

As state leaders examine reforms in curriculum standards, accountability systems, and data collection, we respectfully urge the following principles:

- Preserve constitutional protections for home education
- Avoid regulatory expansion through indirect mechanisms (such as data reporting requirements tied to optional programs)
- Respect parental authority as foundational
- Recognize that homeschool success stems from flexibility and independence

Historically, states that have attempted to integrate home education into institutional accountability frameworks have often seen increased administrative burdens without demonstrable improvement in outcomes. Policymakers should take care not to unintentionally erode a model that is functioning effectively and at no cost to the public system. Policies designed for institutional systems should not automatically be extended to independent family-based education.

Conclusion

Oklahoma thrives when families have the freedom to pursue educational pathways aligned with their convictions and their children's needs.

Homeschooling represents:

- Parental responsibility
- Community engagement
- Academic innovation
- Fiscal independence

Any comprehensive discussion of improving educational outcomes in Oklahoma must include—and carefully preserve—the continued vitality of home education.

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Oklahoma Charter Schools: Governance, Funding, & Student Outcomes

Brent Bushey, CEO of Fuel OKC

A Guide to How Oklahoma's Charter Schools Operate and the Evidence Behind Their Performance

Introduction

Few topics in Oklahoma education generate more misunderstanding than charter schools. Supporters often describe them as innovative public schools that provide families with meaningful choices. Critics sometimes characterize them as private schools receiving public funding. Neither description fully captures what charter schools are or how they operate.

Twenty-five years after Oklahoma authorized its first charter schools, charter schools have become an established part of the state's public education system, educating thousands of students — primarily in Oklahoma City and Tulsa. They are public schools that receive public funding, administer state assessments, and are accountable to taxpayers for both academic and financial performance.

Oklahoma adopted the Oklahoma Charter Schools Act in 1999 with a straightforward goal: create public schools with greater flexibility to meet the needs of students while holding those schools accountable for results.[2] Since then, the charter sector has grown into an important component of Oklahoma's public education system.

Recent national research suggests that Oklahoma's brick-and-mortar charter schools are among the highest-performing charter schools in the nation. Understanding why requires a closer look at how Oklahoma's charter sector is organized.

What Is a Charter School?

A charter school is a public school that operates under a performance contract, or charter, with an approved authorizer. Like traditional public schools, charter schools are tuition-free, open to all students, administer state assessments, and are subject to state and federal accountability requirements.[1]

When more students apply than seats are available, charter schools admit students through a random lottery rather than selective admissions.

The defining feature of the charter model is the exchange of autonomy for accountability. Charter schools receive greater flexibility over staffing, budgeting, scheduling, instructional design, and school culture than many traditional public school districts. In return, they operate under measurable performance expectations. Schools that consistently fail to meet academic, financial, or organizational standards may lose their charter and close.

Charter School Governance

Traditional public school districts are governed by locally elected boards of education. These boards establish district policy, hire and evaluate the superintendent, approve budgets, oversee facilities, and make decisions affecting schools within defined attendance boundaries.

Charter schools follow a different governance model. Each charter school is governed by an independent nonprofit board of directors responsible for overseeing the school's finances, academic performance, and long-term strategy. Rather than reporting to an elected school board, charter schools operate pursuant to a charter agreement approved by an authorized sponsor under Oklahoma law.

Unlike traditional districts, which generally continue to exist indefinitely, charter schools operate under renewable performance contracts. Continued operation depends upon demonstrating academic success, sound financial stewardship, and organizational compliance.

Brick-and-Mortar and Virtual Charter Schools

One of the most important distinctions within Oklahoma's charter sector is the difference between brick-and-mortar charter schools and virtual charter schools.

Brick-and-mortar charter schools provide face-to-face instruction in traditional school buildings. Many are built around specialized educational models such as college preparatory programs, STEM education, career and technical education, fine arts, language immersion, or schools designed to serve students with unique educational needs.

Under Oklahoma law, brick-and-mortar charter schools have multiple potential authorizers. Depending upon the circumstances established in statute, they may be sponsored by eligible local school districts, public colleges and universities, technology center school districts, federally recognized Indian tribes, or the Statewide Charter School Board.

Virtual charter schools operate differently. They provide instruction primarily through online platforms and frequently enroll students from communities across Oklahoma rather than from a single attendance area. Because they serve students statewide, statewide virtual charter schools are authorized through the Statewide Charter School Board.

These differences extend beyond governance. National research consistently evaluates brick-and-mortar charter schools separately from virtual charter schools because they represent fundamentally different instructional models. Stanford University's 2023 National Charter School Study found that brick-and-mortar charter schools generally produced substantially stronger academic growth than full-time virtual charter schools nationwide.[3]

For this reason, discussions about Oklahoma education are

most informative when they distinguish among three types of public schools: traditional public school districts, brick-and-mortar charter schools, and virtual charter schools.

Charter School Funding

Funding is one of the defining differences between Oklahoma's traditional public school districts and its charter schools.

Like traditional districts, charter schools receive state funding that generally follows student enrollment. They also receive many of the same federal education funds available to other public schools.

The most significant difference involves local revenue. Traditional public school districts receive local property tax revenue and may ask voters to approve bond issues that finance new school construction, facility renovations, buses, technology, and other long-term capital improvements.

Brick-and-mortar charter schools generally do not have access to those local funding mechanisms. Instead, many lease facilities, secure private financing, raise philanthropic support, or use operating dollars to pay for buildings and facility improvements.

In practical terms, one public school may build a new campus using voter-approved bond proceeds while another public school pays its mortgage or lease from the same operating budget used to pay teachers and purchase classroom materials. Understanding this distinction is essential when comparing funding across Oklahoma's public education system.

Academic Outcomes

Ultimately, every public school should be evaluated by the same measure: whether students are learning.

In 2023, researchers affiliated with Harvard University published the first national comparison of state charter school sectors using results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, often called the Nation's Report Card. After adjusting for student demographics, Oklahoma ranked sixth nationally among charter sectors included in the study.[4]

That same year, Stanford University's Center for Research on Education Outcomes compared charter school students with statistically similar students attending nearby traditional public schools. Rather than comparing simple test scores, the researchers measured student academic growth over time.

For Oklahoma, the findings were encouraging. Charter school students demonstrated stronger academic growth in both reading and mathematics than comparable students attending traditional public school districts.

Importantly, Stanford's study also distinguished between brick-and-mortar and virtual charter schools. Nationally, brick-and-mortar charter schools substantially outperformed virtual charter schools on measures of student growth. Together, the Harvard and Stanford studies suggest that Oklahoma's strong national reputation is driven primarily by the performance of its brick-and-mortar charter schools.[5]

The Future of Charter Schools in Oklahoma

After more than two decades, charter schools are no longer an experiment. They are an established part of Oklahoma's public education system.

The next phase of the conversation should focus less on governance models and more on ensuring that every student has access to a high-quality public school. Continued attention should be given to facilities funding so that students attending public charter schools have equitable access to quality learning environments while preserving the financial stability of traditional public school districts.

Oklahoma should also maintain the accountability that distinguishes the charter model. High-performing schools should have opportunities to grow and serve more students, while schools that consistently fail to meet expectations should continue to face meaningful consequences.

Traditional public school districts, brick-and-mortar charter schools, and virtual charter schools each serve different educational needs. Rather than viewing these sectors as competitors, Oklahoma should encourage collaboration, share effective educational practices, and remain focused on the common goal of improving outcomes for every student.

Conclusion

Charter schools were created to expand opportunity within public education, not to replace traditional public school districts. More than twenty-five years later, they have become an important part of Oklahoma's educational landscape.

Understanding the distinctions among traditional public school districts, brick-and-mortar charter schools, and virtual charter schools leads to a more informed discussion about governance, funding, and student outcomes. While these public school models differ in important ways, they should ultimately be judged by the same standard: whether they prepare students for success.

By maintaining rigorous accountability, encouraging thoughtful innovation, and keeping student achievement at the center of education policy, Oklahoma can continue strengthening a public education system that provides families with high-quality options and helps every student reach his or her potential.

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Education For What's Next

Erica Irvine, Junior Achievement of Oklahoma

Growing up is hard, and without a stable home, positive role models and enough financial and educational resources, many young Americans fall behind their peers and experience a rocky transition to adulthood. For example, 13% of individuals between the ages of 18 and 24 are neither working nor attending school. Others suffer from poor health conditions that hinder their ability to develop physically or socially. In addition, research shows that when youth grow up in environments with economic problems and a lack of role models, they're more at risk for poverty, early pregnancy and violence, into adulthood.

To determine the places where young Americans are not faring as well as others in the same age group, WalletHub compared the 50 states and the District of Columbia across 15 key indicators of youth risk. Our data set ranges from the share of disconnected youth to the labor force participation rate among young adults to the youth poverty rate.



THE "FUTURE OF WORK" IS HERE

For more than a decade, there have been discussions about the need to prepare young people for the "Future of Work," taking into consideration the impact of automation, AI, and societal changes on the employment prospects of the next generation. With the explosive growth of Generative AI in recent years, it's apparent that the Future of Work is here, with some jobs already being eliminated due to the growing influence of these technologies. In fact, in its 2025 Future of Jobs Report, The World Economic Forum predicts 39 percent of current skillsets will be outdated in five years due to advances in AI.

THE IMPACT ON ECONOMIC MOBILITY AND GENERATIONAL OUTCOMES



Such advances in technology can have an adverse impact on the economic mobility of those unprepared for these changes. In fact, in recent decades the economic mobility of Americans – the ability to do as well or better than previous generations – has declined 45 percent, according to the Brookings Institution, due, in part, to previous technological innovations, like automation and information systems.

The decline in mobility can be linked to the growing impact of technology and globalization on earning potential. There was a time up until the early 1980s when a high school education was enough to sustain a quality standard of living in the U.S. Today, though, even a college education might not be enough as more than a third of college graduates are "underemployed," meaning they work in jobs that don't require a college degree, and that may also pay less than a living wage. Recent advances in AI are threatening to negatively impact access to entry-level and even mid-level jobs for millions of Americans, contributing to downward pressure on economic mobility for this and future generations.

EDUCATION FOR WHAT'S NEXT

Research by Georgetown University indicates that by 2031, 70 percent of jobs will require education or training beyond high school. Currently, though, only one-in-three high school graduates go on to complete a college degree, with many of those being in fields that are not in high earning, high growth professions.

So, what's the response to this challenge? According to the Camber Collective, the top four life experiences expected to positively affect lifetime earnings are 1) completing secondary education, 2) graduating with a degree in a high-paying field of study, 3) receiving mentorship during adolescence, and 4) obtaining a first full-time job with opportunity for advancement.



Job skills training and business ownership can also be beneficial. These experiences can contribute to gaining the transferable skills and competencies, such as creative and critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, and continuous learning, needed to succeed in our rapidly changing economy.

At Junior Achievement, our learning experiences are demonstrated to promote the skills and competencies needed to promote economic mobility. We believe every student deserves a future filled with choices and opportunities. That's why we focus on what drives real economic mobility by helping students become confident, capable, competent, and connected.

Through career-connected learning, we help students:

- **Build Confidence** – Cultivating mindsets that spark engagement and belief in their potential.
- **Gain Capability** – Developing transferable skills and competencies for a changing world.
- **Show Competence** – Reinforcing behaviors through academic achievement and applied learning.
- **Get Connected** – Expanding access to networks, mentors, and meaningful opportunities.

By partnering with schools and communities, we unlock potential and accelerate mobility at scale while expanding access to opportunity-filled futures. In this way, Junior Achievement promotes education for what's next.

To learn more, visit: JA.org

How Jim Barksdale's $100 million gift 25 years ago changed the course of Mississippi public education

Bobby Harrison, Mississippi Today, January 26, 2025

This week marks the 25th anniversary of the landmark contribution of $100 million by Jim Barksdale to improve reading skills in Mississippi.

Standing with state education officials on Jan. 20, 2000, in the old Central High School auditorium in downtown Jackson, Barksdale and his late wife Sally announced their historic gift that would launch the Barksdale Reading Institute, which would create an innovative reading program that would be implemented in public schools across the state.

The contribution, still one of the largest in the state's history, made headlines across America and the world. Slate Magazine listed the contribution by Barksdale, former head of internet software provider Netscape, as the sixth largest in the nation for 2000. The New York Times, which praised the Barksdales on its editorial page, wrote at the time that the contribution was "thought by authorities to be by far the largest in the field of literacy."

The $100 million gift not only provided tangible benefits to Mississippi's schools and children, but it provided a critical symbolic boost to public education in the state.

In a letter to the editor published in The New York Times a couple days after the gift was announced, retired sociology professor Beth Hess of Mountain Lake, N.J, praised the Barksdales but added a telling addendum to her note.

"It is disturbing that the state of Mississippi will be rewarded for its continuing failure to tax its citizens fairly and to allocate enough money to educate students, especially in predominantly Black districts," Hess wrote. "This should have been a public rather than private responsibility."

Indeed, this exact point was on the minds of many Mississippians — certainly including the Barksdales — at the time. And given the then-fresh history of segregation of the state's public schools, how could it not be?

The historic financial commitment made by the Barksdales came less than a quarter of a century from the vote in 1978 to finally remove from the state constitution the provision creating a "separate but equal" system to prevent the integration of the schools.

And it came much less than a quarter of a century from the vote in 1987 to finally remove from the constitution the provision that allowed the Legislature to disband the public schools rather than integrate them. That segregationist provision had been added to the Mississippi Constitution in 1960, with voters in only three of the state's 82 counties rejecting it: Itawamba and Tishomingo counties in northeast Mississippi and Jackson County on the Gulf Coast.

To say in the year 2000 that there were still Mississippians not enamored with a fully integrated Mississippi public school system would be an understatement.

The history of public education in Mississippi, like the history of the state itself, is marred by racial strife and hate-inspired division that continues even today in some ways.

But on that January day in 2000, Jim Barksdale, a Mississippi native and one of the nation's leading business executives, showed them and the nation another way forward, proclaiming his commitment "to keeping the main thing the main thing." And it was clear that he believed the "main thing" was support of an integrated Mississippi public education system.

Barksdale's brother, Claiborne, who ran the Barksdale Reading Institute that was created with the contribution, said that Jim and Sally Barksdale viewed their action as a $100 million investment in Mississippi and its children, not as a gift. If positive results were not being achieved, the Barksdales were prepared to halt the program and invest their money in other beneficial ways.

The program worked, however, and looking back over these past 25 years since the gift, the results are clear. The historic investment produced historic gains that are now dubbed "The Mississippi Miracle."

"The state ranks second in its reading scores for children in poverty and seventh for children from households of color," Claiborne Barksdale wrote this week for Mississippi Today Ideas. "… Tens of thousands of Mississippi children are reading, and reading proficiently, thanks to Jim and Sally's persistent desire to help them achieve a brighter future. I'd say that's a pretty damn good return on their investment."

It could still be argued, as the retired sociology professor did on the New York Times editorial pages in 2000, that Mississippi leaders are not doing enough for public education. But important strides have been made. The state still funds a reading initiative based on the Barksdale model.

While state politicians line up to claim credit for Mississippi's improved reading scores and "The Mississippi Miracle," it's worth remembering that it all started with the Barksdales' investment 25 years ago.

Reading Reforms Meant to Duplicate the "Mississippi Miracle" Are Now Up to Elementary Schools to Implement

Andrea Eger, Oklahoma Watch, May 29, 2026

The Oklahoma Legislature wants a dramatic turnaround in student literacy rates to rival the so-called Mississippi Miracle.

Now, every teacher of kindergarten through third grade, and every reading specialist, instructional coach and principal in elementary schools across the state find themselves on the frontlines of meeting a host of new requirements under the Oklahoma Strong Readers Act – and more importantly, will be trying to achieve measurable success where past efforts have fallen short.

They've got the summer break to digest new non-negotiables, as one state official over early literacy describes the new legislative mandates, and to prepare for heightened expectations come August to intervene with struggling readers and to communicate with parents about their child's challenges.

At Jenks East Elementary School in South Tulsa, Mandy Shimp works by day as the Title I reading specialist for third and fourth grade. On evenings and weekends, she works as a private tutor for children with language-based learning disorders, including dyslexia, drawing on her advanced training as a certified academic language therapist.

When she heard talk of imposing a strict, new requirement to retain – or hold back – the vast majority of Oklahoma students who don't pass the state reading test by the end of third grade, Shimp went into research mode. She ended up filling a binder with information about the decade-long investment of time and at least $100 million into teacher training that laid the groundwork for Mississippi student literacy rates to climb from second-to-last to top-tier between 2013 and 2024.

Now, she is questioning why Oklahoma lawmakers have imposed this key component of Mississippi's law, referred to there as the third-grade gate, with just one year for educators to prepare.

"They're expecting us to build this foundation in a year," Shimp said. "Teacher training is not an extra — it is the foundation. We can pass laws, mandate screeners, and retain students, but if teachers are not deeply trained in how reading develops, how to teach phonological awareness, how to diagnose reading difficulties, and how to intervene effectively, the legislation will not produce the results people are hoping for."

During 24 years in education, Shimp has attended more than 100 meetings with parents, teachers and administrators to help decide whether retention or probationary promotion to the next grade level is most appropriate for a child. That firsthand experience has her most troubled by the students who won't qualify for so-called good-cause exemptions allowed under Senate Bill 1778.

"Students not on IEPs (Individualized Education Programs, which are customized for children with disabilities) can be retained up to two times – once in kindergarten, first or second, and then again in third grade," Shimp said, shaking her head. "I begged, I begged, I begged, I reached out to legislators – `Please take that out.'

"That is an eighth grader driving," she said. "That is a kid graduating when they're 20 years old. It is not effective. If they are not on an IEP, there's other issues going on."

Michelle Goldstein, principal at Northeast Elementary School in Owasso, is a lot more optimistic about the sweeping overhaul of Oklahoma's Strong Readers Act because her school already has in place the Multi-Tiered System of Supports, or MTSS, now required.

Through this approach, all Oklahoma schools will use screener tests to identify struggling readers in early grades and provide them interventions of increasing levels of intensity with the goal of ensuring they score proficient or better by the end of third grade.

Goldstein said Northeast's most powerful strategy is the use of child study teams. Teachers sign up once per month to meet with a team of reading specialists, a psychologist, a counselor, two school administrators, and special education and English Learner teachers to discuss individual cases of academic or behavioral challenges.

"We sit there as a team and brainstorm ideas for what might help the student," Goldstein said. "Then the teacher comes back the next month to discuss the results. As educators, we have never arrived knowing how to help every student. It's strength in numbers. We all know a little, but together, that's a lot."

With news of the changes in state law coming as schools were winding down for summer break, Goldstein said she

believes the greatest challenge for the majority of school-based educators like her will be to catch up on the new legal requirements.

She will rely on district administrators, who will rely on guidance from the Oklahoma State Department of Education.

"I think it will be harder for schools that don't already have those multi-tiered systems in place," said Goldstein. "For us, I think it's how we roll it out, how we package that change for parents and students. We make or break the weather of how that feels in our building. I'm not worried about having a bunch of kids being caught by a law."

Rush to Provide State Guidance, Support

The same person credited by State Superintendent Lindel Fields with devoting hundreds of work hours as the point person for the Oklahoma State Department of Education on SB 1778 as it moved through the legislative process is now leading the state-level work to implement the new law.

"We are going through this with a fine-toothed comb right now, making sure districts will have what they need to implement this in the fall," said Melissa Ahlgrim, director of literacy policy and programs at OSDE. "A lot of this is not new."

Because of the comprehensive overhaul of the Strong Readers Act, state education officials are busy updating the OSDE webpage on the subject, writing a special newsletter for statewide distribution, preparing two public webinars scheduled for July, and speaking at summer conferences for educators.

The most urgent requirements, Ahlgrim said, are for all schools to use screeners to identify students' reading challenges early and to begin reporting to parents several times each school year about their child's Student Literacy Intervention Plan beginning in August. She said there will also be literacy-related changes in how state funding is calculated in the 2026-27 academic year, but that is a concern for school district administrators.

"The biggest misunderstanding I see is third grade is too late," Ahlgrim said. "We have to be helping them starting in kindergarten. It is still up to schools to decide how they will best meet the needs of their students, but they must better define the framework. We are defining those fences, so there is a lot of freedom left within those fences, but if you're way off in another pasture, that won't work. There are some new non-negotiables."

Chief among those new non-negotiables is who will be allowed to move on to fourth grade – and who will not.

State test data for 2024-25 show that 21,300 third graders failed to score at basic or above, meaning that under the new law, they could have been held back unless they qualified for an exemption. But that part of SB 1778, as well as a new requirement for schools to give second graders the state's third-grade reading test unless their parents opt out, won't kick in until 2027-28.

That new testing mandate is the subject of the most questions and concerns Ahlgrim and her team at the state Education Department are reportedly receiving, and they don't yet have all of the answers.

"We are still trying to figure that out because it was added later in the (legislative) process," Ahlgrim said. "They (legislators) had been talking to Indiana, which has done a version of this, but they have an opt-in for second graders to take the third-grade test. One of the platforms the authors had was, `We need to stay the course. We're not going to see a change in one year.'"

To support the overhaul of the Strong Readers Act, the state budget includes more than $43 million for reading instruction and interventions in schools, $5 million in supplemental funding for teacher training academies this summer, and $5 million in ongoing annual funding for teacher training programs. Additional funding will support reading-at-home initiatives and statewide math and reading screeners, helping educators identify students' learning needs earlier.

Among those increases is a rapid expansion of Help Elevate Reading Outcomes for Every Student, which the legislature established as a pilot program three years ago.

Ahlgrim's team is on a hiring spree to expand the literacy instructional team that will be working with 145 of the state's approximately 1,000 elementary schools to implement science-based reading instruction through professional development and coaching for teachers and principals. They ended 2025-26 with 15 on the team, and are aiming to fill new positions to deploy a team of 30 across the state beginning in August.

HEROES team members said they are most concerned about schools that don't already have well-articulated systems for identifying students reading below grade level and providing specialized, targeted instruction to help them catch up.

"Like in a car, that check engine light comes on," said Classie Nolan, who worked 17 years as a teacher and instructional reading coach at Frederick before joining the HEROES team 3 years ago. "What skills are they missing? Where are we having roadblocks for this student? That's where we provide a diagnostic assessment. We're not going to ask for a tire when it could be a problem with our transmission. We have to diagnose it and get to the root of the problem."

Lolly Cole, an Ada-based member of the HEROES team, said teacher training and buy-in by elementary school principals are key to improving student outcomes in reading.

"As a teacher, you get concerned you don't have the time to balance it all out," Cole said. "But the great thing I've seen from training or classes we've worked with, is the reaction of, `Wow, I never learned about phonics and phonemic awareness.' I understand the concerns – there's only so much time to balance between family and work. But this is a process. It's not a quick fix. Most of the teachers I've come into contact with are excited. We are all here to make a difference for kids and our communities."

Ripple Effects

Public school educators aren't the only ones preparing for the implementation of SB 1778, according to Sandra Valentine, who teaches third grade at Trinity School, a private school in Oklahoma City dedicated to students with learning differences.

"My school will keep growing and more schools like it will keep popping up all around that state," she said. "If I'm told three times a year my kid might be retained, I'm going to be a momma bear and say, `Where can I take my kid so they won't be 19 when they graduate?'"

When Ryan Walters, a political lightning rod, entered office as state superintendent three years ago, Valentine walked away from public schools after teaching third grade for 12 years combined at Little Axe and Tecumseh.

Still, she thinks about returning to work in a public school one day, and she continues to visit the state Capitol to advocate for public school policies she feels are best for the public school students in her own family, her youngest daughter and six grandchildren.

"I have thought about it, but Ryan Walters' policies are still there," Valentine said. "We have not changed anything, really."

Her school is growing so rapidly that its kindergarten-through-third-grade classes now require a larger building. That means working through the start of summer break. Sorting through the contents of her classroom this week, Valentine said the tote bags, stickers and large painted poster emblazoned with her personal motto, "Literacy is non-negotiable," will all certainly make the move to her new classroom.

"We have a lot of state officials tour here, wanting to know what we're doing. (State Senator) Adam Pugh, when he came to my room, asked where my painted poster is – because he had heard of it," she said, with a laugh.

The difference-makers, Valentine said, are that all teachers must have specialized training or certification in reading instruction, every student attends reading therapy class daily, and Trinity students aren't subjected to the state's high-stakes standardized test.

"We are meeting them where they're at," she said. "Not third-grade level, but working backward to where they are. Now, I'm no longer teaching to a test and freely teaching to the needs of my students. Why can't we just put this in a public school?"

Valentine previously worked as a consultant to help improve schools' academic results by targeting students who were just shy of meeting the benchmark for reading proficiency with state test prep.

"It's all a numbers game," Valentine said. "When our lawmakers say our kids in public schools are not proficient in reading, it's not like a third-grade child is not reading Dick and Jane. It is an 8- or 9-year-old having to listen to 15 minutes of instructions right off the bat, then be on a computer for two to three hours, navigating passages that are 200-300 words long – sometimes on subject matter they have no familiarity with – and answering 60 questions. If they're not passing after all that, then that's considered not reading on grade level."

Oklahoma grows statewide team of reading coaches as new literacy laws take effect

Nuria Martinez-Keel, Oklahoma Voice, August 11, 2026

An expanded team of reading coaches will train teachers across Oklahoma as public schools implement new requirements for childhood literacy.

The Oklahoma State Department of Education's HEROES Literacy Instructional Team has grown to 24 reading coaches and six regional supervisors, following recent legislative action. The team, which the state lawmakers converted from a pilot program to a permanent fixture, will work with 120 elementary schools over the coming academic year.

The larger team will visit fewer schools than before, but educators at each served site will get more comprehensive coaching, said Melissa Ahlgrim, the Education Department's program director of literacy policy and programs.

"It's 120 schools that will receive more support than just a quick fly-by," she said. "It's a slightly reduced number of schools, but it is a more intensive kind of support."

Last year's smaller group of 14 coaches visited 150 schools in 2025-26. Team members were assigned 12 to 15 schools each, so they could reach each site only a few times a month, Ahlgrim said. That left time for consulting but not in-depth coaching.

Oklahoma's updated Strong Readers Act made the HEROES team a permanent program at the Education Department and raised its minimum number of coaches to 20.

The law instructs the team to serve six geographic regions in the state and to prioritize schools that score the lowest on either annual state English language arts tests or on a statewide reading screener.

The Legislature also forbade districts from refusing the team's help or else risk losing Strong Readers Act funds. Previously, the team worked with schools on a voluntary basis.

Each of the 24 coaches will be assigned up to five schools at a time to visit multiple days a week, Ahlgrim said. They'll join teachers in their classrooms and explain practical ways to improve their teaching methods for reading.

"When a teacher gets into their classroom, because they have so many things going on, it's really hard to implement something new, and so that's where coaching comes in," Ahlgrim said. "It says, 'Let me walk you through step by step. Let me model this for you. Let me help watch you do it and help guide you along the way.'"

A school must demonstrate sustainable growth in student reading scores for the team to start drawing back its involvement, Ahlgrim said.

School districts will spend the year implementing new legal requirements for small-group instruction, teacher training and progress monitoring of struggling readers. An even bigger change will come in 2027-28, when third graders will be held back a year if they score below a basic reading level on state tests and fail a second literacy assessment.

Lawmakers also required every district to employ or contract with a reading specialist, establishing summer training academies for teachers who wanted to earn this designation.

House Speaker Kyle Hilbert, R-Bristow, said these academies are an essential piece of the law because the Education Department "can't employ enough coaches to go to every school district in the state."

Instead, teachers from Oklahoma's 540 districts could participate in the summer academies to train in the science of reading, earn a $3,000 stipend and return to their schools to help their fellow educators.

"Ultimately, we pass laws as the Legislature, but it's the teachers, it's the parents, it's the principals, it's the reading specialists who are really the ones implementing this and will make it become a reality," Hilbert said. "I'm just excited to see what this is going to mean for our kids and our students as the school year starts."

The HEROES team organized summer literacy workshops, as well, across the state for teacher professional development. The team also offers six- to eight-week online courses during the school year to 150 teachers on best practices for reading instruction, Ahlgrim said.

The Education Department had to quickly add to the team over the summer to comply with the new legislation.

One hundred candidates applied for the open positions, Ahlgrim said, and all coaches and regional leads were fully staffed by July 4. But, a few recent departures have left three coaching positions open as the school year begins.

A coach's base salary is $68,200, and each of the six regional leads earns $72,200, she said.

Oklahoma could launch statewide read-aloud initiative to boost literacy

Karla J Cunningham, Ph.D., The Journal Record, July 24, 2026

Oklahoma's education challenges are well documented, and the state's long-term outcomes will not improve without sustained effort. But not every solution requires legislation, major funding, or multi-year implementation. Some of the most effective interventions are simple, human, and immediately actionable. One of them is reading aloud and it is something Oklahoma could begin statewide tomorrow.

The data make the stakes clear. In 2026, Oklahoma ranked 48th out of 51 states in overall education performance. The state remains 49th in per-pupil spending, averaging $12,519 per student, well below the regional average of $14,975. Seventy-seven percent of Oklahoma's fourth graders score below proficient in reading. Sixty percent of young children ages three and four are not enrolled in school. These numbers represent real children entering kindergarten already behind, and real families who need support long before a child ever steps into a classroom.

Reading aloud is one of the most powerful tools available to families, educators, and communities. Children whose caregivers talk to them and read to them hear more words, develop stronger language structures, and enter school with a foundation that predicts long-term academic success. Research shows that even children who are read only one book a day will hear about 290,000 more words by age five than those who are not regularly read to. The benefits extend well beyond early childhood. Reading aloud plays a critical role in the literacy development of older students who are transitioning from learning to read to reading to learn.

Schools can only do so much in a normal school day. Families and communities are essential partners in literacy, and they need simple, accessible ways to participate. As a parent, I read to my daughter every day from infancy through high school. Part of our read-aloud time came from our homeschool language arts curriculum: she read one assigned book per month on her own, and I read a classic aloud that matched her developmental stage. This exposed her to great writing, expanded her vocabulary, and created a back-and-forth dialogue that strengthened comprehension. Not every family homeschools, but every family can build small rituals that make reading a shared experience.

Oklahoma could take this idea further by launching a statewide Read-Aloud Initiative. The concept is simple: invite prominent Oklahomans to read books aloud on video for children of all ages. These could include Oklahoma City Thunder players, musicians, actors, authors, and local leaders. These are people children (and parents) already admire and pay attention to. The videos could live on a public Oklahoma website, on YouTube, and across social media platforms. School districts, libraries, and community organizations could share them as part of their literacy outreach.

This does not require high production value or complex infrastructure. A person, a book, and a camera are enough. What matters is consistency, visibility, and the message it sends: reading is for everyone, every day, and Oklahoma's leaders value literacy enough to participate personally. The initiative could also include short "favorite book" lists curated by each figure, occasional special readings tied to Oklahoma history or culture, and content appropriate for toddlers, early readers, and older students.

While Oklahoma already has the Thunder Reading Challenge, an annual literacy initiative designed to inspire a lifelong love of reading, it is limited to 2nd graders and built around competition. Libraries offer similar challenges during the summer. I'm advocating for something earlier and something later. A statewide approach rooted in inspiration, visibility, and shared experience rather than prizes or point systems.

A statewide Read-Aloud Initiative would strengthen early literacy, support families who may not know where to start, and build excitement around reading. It would create shared cultural and family moments and give Oklahoma children access to positive role models. Most importantly, it is something the state could begin immediately. No legislation is required. No major funding is necessary. What is needed is imagination, leadership, and a willingness to try something new.

Oklahoma's education challenges will not be solved overnight. But we can begin building momentum with ideas that are simple, joyful, and accessible to every family. A statewide Read-Aloud Initiative is one of the easiest wins available to us and one that would ripple across generations.

It is time to consider what Oklahoma could build together, starting with a book, a voice, and a shared commitment to our children's future.

Karla J. Cunningham, PhD is a Norman-based analyst who writes about leadership, credibility, and statewide performance systems. She created the Oklahoma Innovation Hub to map and strengthen the state's innovation, economic, and SES ecosystems, producing analysis aimed at improving long-term statewide outcomes.

OICA encourages our nation's governors to expand civics education

Joe Dorman, The Journal Record, July 28, 2026

The 2026 National Governors Association (NGA) Summer Meeting is in Oklahoma City this week July 30 – August 1. This bipartisan event highlights the Governor's Compact on Entrepreneurship.

The governors will discuss an array of topics focused on "Reigniting the American Dream." Opening ceremonies include a town hall on "Common Ground," moderated by NBC News' Kristen Welker, led by current NGA Chair and Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt, with NGA Vice Chair and Maryland Gov. Wes Moore, Govs. Jared Polis, Matt Meyer, Josh Stein, Spencer Cox, and Phil Scott, plus Tim Shriver, UNITE CEO and co-creator of The Dignity Index.

"Common ground" is a crucial topic not discussed enough in our nation. The United States seems increasingly divided, where I wish leaders would focus on what unites us instead of attacking others with differing opinions. Among those holding the highest elective offices, partisan power stoked by division outweighs consensus solutions.

A unifying project of which I am very proud is Oklahoma's Kid Governor® program, operated by Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy (OICA). The Connecticut Democracy Center's award-winning civic education program provides lesson plans for state affiliates to share with 5th grade teachers who sign up.

Teachers receive free lesson plans about the role of elected officials, how elections work, the importance of voting, and civic responsibility no partisan slant or bias. Teachers may also opt into an enhanced curriculum with extra lessons for classroom elections in which students select an issue they feel is important and then campaign on this in the classroom.

Classroom winners are considered to have won their Primary Election and then will send a two-minute video to our staff. Then, our board members and the former governors of Oklahoma and their first spouses help select seven finalists. We prepare a ballot listing those seven and send those and their videos to Kid Governor® classrooms to hold a General Election.

The candidate with the most votes serves as Oklahoma's Kid Governor® for the next calendar year; the remaining finalists will serve as Kid Lieutenant Governor and state-level cabinet members. They travel around the state speaking to civic organizations or acting as advisors for youth-serving programs which desire a youth voice.

Fifth graders across Connecticut, Nebraska, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, and Vermont elected their 2026 Kid Governors and they were sworn into office in the early part of the year. Here in Oklahoma, Katelyn Talley of Valliant Elementary School in southeastern Oklahoma was elected and she is doing an exemplary job.

In Oklahoma, we also partner with our state 4-H program to hold a similar one-day conference to elect a 4-H Junior Governor who also travels and delivers speeches to peers, helping to inspire them to greater heights and to understand young voices matter despite being not old enough to vote. Our 4-H Junior Governor is Riley Braden of Creek County.

NBC Nightly News featured three of the 2025 Kid Governors® in a story which you can view here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9NW9seFeG7Y&t=315s

Just like the actual governors at the NGA conference, current Kid Governors have their own platform issues such as inclusion for students with disabilities; cancer awareness; the danger of smoking, vaping and drugs; animal abuse; and homelessness.

If we could find common ground and consensus for solutions with these five topics, can you imagine what kind of country we might live in?

I am thankful that Governor Stitt, chair of the NGA this year, has been supportive of our Kid Governor® program here in Oklahoma. The fact that this program is only in four other states speaks volumes to me on where others should focus their vision.

If a governor visiting Oklahoma this week might perchance read this column, you can learn more about signing up your state at https://kidgovernor.org/ and if you are a 5th grade teacher in Oklahoma, you can reach out to Licia Walters at lwalters@oica.org in our office to receive more information for signing up your classroom.

Joe Dorman is the current CEO for the Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy.

Art Education as a Cost-Effective Strategy for Strengthening Oklahoma's Public Schools

Kirkpatrick Policy Group, July 10, 2026

Introduction

Oklahoma's public education system faces deep, long-standing challenges: low reading and math performance, high poverty, chronic absenteeism, and declining access to enrichment opportunities. These problems are systemic, and no single intervention can solve them. But some interventions are more cost-effective than others, and some address multiple root causes at once.

This article argues that expanded access to arts education is one of the most cost-effective ways to strengthen Oklahoma's public schools, particularly when targeted toward elementary grades, high-poverty districts, rural communities, and schools with no certified arts teacher. Research shows that arts education improves early literacy, increases attendance, strengthens engagement, and supports teacher retention - all areas where Oklahoma struggles most. In a state where resources are limited and needs are high, arts education offers a practical, evidence-based strategy for improving student outcomes.

Challenges and Opportunities

Oklahoma's education challenges are well-documented and severe. The most reliable national benchmark, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessment, ranks Oklahoma 48th in combined fourth- and eighth-grade reading and math performance [1]. This represents a long decline: Oklahoma fell from 21st in 2000 to 48th in 2024, one of the steepest drops in the nation [2]. These results reflect deeper structural issues that shape student achievement.

The first challenge is low early literacy. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Kids Count dataset, only about one in four Oklahoma third graders reads at grade level [3]. Roughly 70-75 percent score below "Proficient" on the Oklahoma School Testing Program (OSTP) reading assessment [4]. By contrast, Oklahoma's Reading Sufficiency Act (RSA) benchmarks - often cited in public discussions - measure minimum competency for retention decisions, not grade-level mastery [5]. RSA data therefore show much higher rates of "reading readiness" than NAEP or Kids Count, but they do not reflect true proficiency.

The second challenge is high poverty and economic instability. Oklahoma ranks near the bottom nationally in child well-being, with 21 percent of children living in poverty [6] and 27 percent living in households spending more than 30 percent of income on housing [7]. Poverty is one of the strongest predictors of low reading and math performance [8], and its effects show up clearly in Oklahoma's proficiency rates.

The third challenge is chronic absenteeism and low engagement. Many Oklahoma districts report high rates of chronic absenteeism, which is strongly correlated with low academic performance [9]. Students who are disengaged or frequently absent struggle to build the vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension skills needed for success in reading and math.

The fourth challenge is declining access to enrichment, especially in fine arts. Oklahoma schools offered 1,110 fewer art and music classes in 2017-18 than four years earlier [10], and 28 percent of students lacked access to any fine arts instruction [11]. By the 2021-22 school year, 13.7 percent of Oklahoma's public-school students (116,943) lacked access to art education, and one in four schools did not offer arts courses, according to the Oklahoma Art Education Data Dashboard, a collaboration between the Oklahoma State Department of Education, Oklahomans for the Arts, and the Kirkpatrick Family Fund [12].

These declines occurred during a period of long-term underfunding, staffing shortages, and rising poverty. In 2024, the Legislature passed HB 3278, repealing the high-school fine arts and world language graduation requirements [13]. Supporters argued the change would allow for more math and science coursework, but the repeal removed a statewide guarantee for arts instruction at a time when districts were already reducing offerings due to fiscal constraints.

These challenges are serious, but they also create an opportunity: interventions that strengthen early literacy, improve engagement, and support school climate can have outsized impact [14]. Arts education is one of those interventions.

The Value of Art Education in Public Schools

Arts education is not extracurricular. It is a research-supported strategy for improving academic outcomes, especially in reading and language development. Studies consistently show that participation in arts instruction improves vocabulary, expressive language, phonological awareness, and reading comprehension [15]- all foundational literacy skills. These benefits are strongest in elementary grades, where early literacy gaps first emerge.

Arts education also improves attendance, motivation, and school engagement [16]. Students who participate in arts programs are more likely to attend school regularly, complete assignments, and stay engaged in class. These effects matter because absenteeism and disengagement are major drivers of low reading and math performance in Oklahoma. In addition, arts education strengthens school climate.

Schools with robust arts programs report better teacher morale, lower burnout, and more positive relationships

between students and staff [17]. This is especially important in Oklahoma, where teacher shortages and turnover remain persistent challenges.

Finally, arts education promotes equity. Research shows that arts participation has the strongest academic and social benefits for students in rural and high-poverty schools [18]. These students often have the least access to enrichment opportunities outside of school, making school-based arts programs particularly impactful.

In short, arts education supports the skills and conditions that drive academic success: literacy, engagement, attendance, and school climate. These are precisely the areas where Oklahoma struggles most.

How Art Education Would Specifically Address Oklahoma's Challenges

Arts education aligns directly with Oklahoma's most urgent needs. The state's literacy crisis - with only one in four third graders reading at grade level - demands interventions that strengthen vocabulary, expressive language, and comprehension [19]. Arts instruction does exactly that. Integrating arts into early-grade classrooms supports the development of reading fluency and comprehension, helping students build the foundational skills needed for later success.

Arts education also addresses Oklahoma's high absenteeism and low engagement. When students are excited to come to school, attendance improves. When they feel connected to their learning, engagement rises. Arts programs create these conditions. They make school more enjoyable, more meaningful, and more relevant - especially for students who struggle in traditional academic settings [20].

For high-poverty districts, arts education offers a powerful equity strategy. Students facing economic hardship often have limited access to enrichment opportunities outside of school. School-based arts programs help close that gap [21]. They provide experiences that build confidence, creativity, and resilience - qualities that support academic achievement across subjects.

Rural schools benefit as well. Many rural districts lack access to community arts organizations, museums, or cultural institutions. A certified arts educator can provide experiences that students would not otherwise have. In small rural schools, itinerant teachers can serve multiple campuses, ensuring access without requiring a full-time teacher at every site [22].

Finally, arts education supports teacher retention. Oklahoma's teacher workforce has faced years of shortages and turnover. Arts programs improve school climate and reduce burnout [23], helping schools retain teachers and maintain stability. And as the Legislature continues to refine early-grade reading policy - including SB 1778, the 2026 law that strengthened intervention requirements and created a formal retention-review process [24]- schools need strategies that support both students and teachers.

In each of these areas - literacy, engagement, equity, rural access, and workforce stability - arts education offers a practical, cost-effective strategy for improving outcomes. It does not solve every problem, but it addresses several of Oklahoma's most pressing challenges at once.

Conclusion

Oklahoma's public education system faces serious challenges: low reading and math proficiency, high poverty, chronic absenteeism, and declining access to enrichment. These problems are complex, and no single intervention can solve them. But some interventions offer more value than others, and arts education is one of the most cost-effective strategies available. It strengthens early literacy, improves attendance, increases engagement, supports school climate, and promotes equity - all areas where Oklahoma struggles most. By expanding access to arts education, especially in elementary grades, high-poverty districts, rural communities, and schools with no certified arts teacher, Oklahoma can take a practical, evidence-based step toward improving student outcomes. In a state where resources are limited and needs are high, arts education is not a luxury. It is a smart investment in the future of Oklahoma's children.

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"Art and science are not opposite sides of the same coin—they are different faces of the same coin. By moving from STEM to STEAM, we inject human meaning and design into pure technical capability."

John Maeda

States, including Oklahoma, move to limit classroom screen time

Robbie Sequeira, Stateline, July 27, 2026

After school cellphone bans passed many statehouses with bipartisan support in recent legislative sessions, state lawmakers are turning to legislation governing how long students should spend looking at screens.

This year, four states passed laws restricting or regulating screen time for students from childcare through fifth grade.

Iowa capped digital instruction at 60 minutes per day for students in kindergarten through fifth grade, with exceptions for special education, assessments and computer science.

Utah lawmakers this year directed the state education board to develop grade-specific technology rules, including restrictions on screen time in kindergarten through third grade and prohibiting one-device-per-student ratios in elementary school.

A new Tennessee law requires every district and charter school serving K-5 students to adopt an age-appropriate digital device policy to minimize unnecessary screen time. And Alabama this year adopted a law requiring the establishment of screen time standards and teacher training for childcare facilities, prekindergarten and kindergarten.

But a Missouri bill to require school districts and charter schools to adopt screen time policies for kindergarten through fifth grade and an Oklahoma proposal to cap screen time at 60 minutes per day for students in prekindergarten through fifth grade both failed.

The Missouri bill easily cleared the House but stalled in the Senate. Despite passing the Oklahoma House unanimously, that bill stalled in the Senate and faced pushback from a technology industry trade group. The Software and Information Industry Association referred to the bill as an "unfunded mandate" and said it would increase administrative burdens and undermine workforce readiness.

Some school districts also are adopting screen time policies for the upcoming school year. The Los Angeles Unified School District, the nation's second-largest school district, is the one of the first to impose systemwide, grade-by-grade instructional screen limits.

Los Angeles has barred instructional screen time before second grade. The district also set limits that increase incrementally to 60 minutes per subject each week for middle school students and 90 minutes per subject each week for high school students.

Inanna Balkin, a rising high school senior at Amherst Regional High School in Massachusetts, told Stateline that "it's really important for students to learn how to manage their screen time," and that schools should help students develop habits for managing screen time rather than simply removing access to technology.



High school students unlock magnetic locking pouches containing their phones after class with a newly established a phone-free policy in 2024. After the success of cellphone bans nationwide, state lawmakers are turning to legislation restricting how much time students can look at screen. (Alixel Cabrera/Utah News Dispatch)

"Automatically not having access to your phone or a screen during the day kind of doesn't allow for students to be responsible for their own management when school is over," said Balkin, who uses an app called Opal to block distractions while doing homework.

There are no clear national statistics measuring how many minutes students spend using screens for classroom instruction, yet screen time has become a focus of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services under Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., including a warning from the surgeon general's office.

Tracy Weeks, senior director of education policy and strategy at education technology company Instructure, told Stateline that states should consider metrics other than minutes when proposing screen time policies.

"The policy focus has been on minutes, and that's the wrong conversation to be having, because not all minutes are created equal," Weeks said. "Scrolling for 10 minutes is not the same as actually interacting with a tool for learning."

Virginia now requires public schools to provide instruction about time spent using electronic devices and their addictive potential. Maine is directing the Maine Education Policy Research Institute to study classroom technology use, including average instructional time on school-issued devices and existing safeguards.

States try new measures to get chronically absent students back to class

Robbie Sequeira, Stateline, July 8, 2026

This year, at least six states enacted laws trying to reduce the number of students chronically absent from school.

The measures include requiring monitoring of absences and publicly releasing data, developing new guidance on the best ways to address the problem and increasing punishments for parents and guardians of chronically absent students.

Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 10% or more of school days in an academic year, which equates to about 18 days or two days per month.

A Utah law signed in March creates a student attendance monitoring system and requires the identification of at-risk students. Parents of students in grades 1-6 will receive a notice of violation after five truancies. If parents don't meet with school officials to address the truancy, they could face a class B misdemeanor.

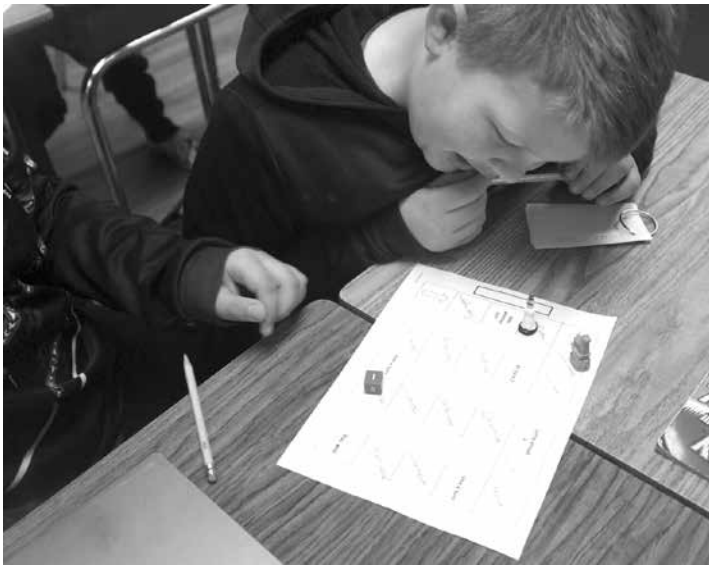
Oregon's new law requires every school district and public charter school to compile data about the students who regularly attend class or are chronically absent, which will be made publicly available by the state's Department of Education.

Vermont's new law overhauls how the state defines and handles chronic absenteeism and truancy. Chronic absenteeism will remain categorized as 10% or more days of missed attendance. Truancy is classified as 20 or more unexcused absences within a school year.

If a student is considered truant and school-based interventions haven't improved attendance, the law allows the state's attorney to fine parents a maximum of $1,000 or to file a court petition against the parents.

Additionally, by July 2027, the state's Agency of Education must develop a model policy on chronic absenteeism and truancy, including guidance on excusing absences, addressing absenteeism among students with disabilities and considering how bullying and hazing could impact a student's attendance.

Under a new Tennessee law, a student transferring during the school year will have the number of unexcused absences reported to their next school, and any future unexcused absences will be added on a cumulative record. And it removes the five-hour limit on the amount of community service a judge may order for the parent or guardian of a student with five or more unexcused absences during a school year.



A student reads at his desk in Oregon. The state and at least five others enacted laws this year aiming to reduce chronic absenteeism. (Photo by Alex Baumhardt/Oregon Capital Chronicle)

Under a sweeping K-12 education legislative package enacted this year in Mississippi, the state is required to fund one attendance officer per 4,000 compulsory-school-aged children.

And a recent New Jersey law establishes a chronic absenteeism task force, which will develop recommendations on the best way to address the problem.

According to FutureEd, a think tank at Georgetown University, lawmakers filed more than 70 bills across 24 states this legislative session about chronic absenteeism.

Of the 44 states and Washington, D.C., that have released 2024-25 attendance data, most states showed improvement, FutureEd found. But Colorado, Oklahoma, Mississippi, New Mexico and the district reported a rise in missed school days. And no state has fully returned to pre-pandemic levels, it said.

According to its most recent data, the U.S. Department of Education says the national rate of chronic absenteeism reached about 31% in 2021-22 and fell to 28% in 2022-23.

Broken Arrow's Vanguard Academy

Oklahoma Academy Research Team

Vanguard Academy is Broken Arrow Public Schools' state-of-the-art STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) learning hub — designed for students who thrive in hands-on, project-based environments where creativity, collaboration, and real-world problem solving take center stage.

From the outside, Vanguard Academy's bold, modern architecture is eye-catching. Inside, that same design philosophy carries through. Open, flexible learning spaces replace rows of desks, and traditional textbooks give way to tools, materials, and projects. The learning techniques mirror the aesthetics: active, interdisciplinary, and student-driven.

As the academy prepared to graduate its first senior class in 2024, administrators and educators emphasized that Vanguard represents a fundamentally different approach to high school.

"Vanguard is a different approach to the high school experience," said Patrick Ibison, a science coach at Vanguard Academy. "We are committed to meeting students where they are in a non-traditional classroom."

Students can be found in the makerspace collaborating amid sawdust, tools, and prototypes; in labs exploring scientific concepts through experimentation; or outdoors applying lessons in agricultural and environmental settings. Front-of-the-room lectures and multiple-choice quizzes are rare. Instead, students learn by doing — and by owning their educational journey.

"Our goal is for them to find a way that they are proud of what they learned," Ibison said. "That the learning and effort itself leaves a positive memory that they want to do more of."

That philosophy resonates with students. Sophomore Jaxon Roop described Vanguard as a close-knit learning community where relationships matter. "Everyone is so kind to each other. You know everyone, their name, what they are working on, and you have a relationship with your teachers," he said. "It's not like you go into your classroom, sit down, take notes, say goodbye."

The curriculum emphasizes growth, creativity, and application. Physical science students bring abstract concepts like energy flow to life through projects. English coursework may be explored through coding. Environmental science students have tied fishing flies that are later put to actual use — blending technical skill with practical outcomes.

Students say the experience builds confidence as much as competence. "I love our core values," said sophomore Addison Bass. "One of my favorites is 'Growth Over Comfort,' which means stepping out of your comfort zone to do things."

Program Options

Vanguard Academy offers two full-time programs and one part-time option, serving students in grades 9–12 and meeting all state education standards, including required assessments.

Innovative Elective Program (Part-Time)
This option allows Broken Arrow High School students to earn elective credits on the Vanguard Academy campus. Courses span emerging, workforce-aligned fields such as drone technology, renewable energy, and other applied STEM topics. Enrollment occurs through the regular course selection process.

XPO (Full-Time Program)
XPO is a full-time, interdisciplinary, project-based learning program. Students — known as "Innovators"— earn core academic credits through integrated coursework and explore elective interests through diverse, real-world experiences. The program culminates in a senior-year eXPOsition, a personalized, passion-driven capstone project.

Broken Arrow Design Lab (BAd Lab) – Full-Time Program
BAd Lab applies Human-Centered Design to real-world challenges in collaboration with community partners. Students develop communication, teamwork, and design-thinking skills while creating services, systems, spaces, and products that address real needs. A signature feature is Design Rotation, a student-led course for sophomores and juniors focused on community-centered projects such as Project Good, Pay It Forward, Entrepreneurship, and Partnership Café.

As of 2024, Vanguard Academy served approximately 255 students and received about 200 applications for just 75 full-time seats — underscoring strong demand for its innovative model.

Changes Beginning in the 2026–27 School Year

Beginning with the 2026–27 school year, Broken Arrow Public Schools will implement changes designed to expand access and better align Vanguard Academy offerings with workforce needs:

Vanguard Academy courses will be offered exclusively to students in grades 10–12.

The application process for Vanguard Academy courses will be eliminated.

A new introductory course at the Freshman Academy will prepare ninth-grade students for future Vanguard Academy opportunities.

District leaders say the changes build on Vanguard Academy's early success — broadening participation while preserving the hands-on, student-centered approach that has defined the school since its launch.

Shoelace Learning's gamified literacy platform aims to engage Oklahoma students

Stephen A. Martin, NonDoc, July 13, 2026

Inside a fifth-grade classroom at Purcell Intermediate School, students are not just answering reading comprehension questions. They are defending digital villages.

On their Chromebooks, students read passages and answer questions through an online literacy platform called Shoelace Learning. Correct answers allow them to strengthen their in-game "dwells," or home bases, inside the game.

To the students, the experience feels familiar.

One compared the program to Clash of Clans. Another said it reminded him of Subway Surfers. But instead of attacking rival villages or dodging trains, the only way to advance is to read — and understand — the text in front of them.

Platforms like Shoelace Learning are part of a growing effort to address a persistent challenge in Oklahoma schools: Students who fall behind in reading, particularly after early elementary grades, often struggle to catch up.

"Particularly right now, I would say the biggest gaps are in adolescent literacy," said April Grace, executive director of the Oklahoma Public Schools Resource Center.

For many struggling readers, the issue extends beyond simple skill gaps. It also involves disengagement.

"Engagement is the intervention," said Shoelace Learner founder Julia Rivard Dexter.

In intervention teacher Dawn Perigo's classroom, students alternate between reading passages and answering comprehension questions that determine how much progress they can make in the game. Some students keep physical books beside their laptops as they work.

One Purcell student who demonstrated the game said he enjoyed reading and pointed to a chapter book on his desk. The title appeared to be a higher-level young adult book, more advanced than what might typically be expected of a fifth grader.

Several other students had books next to them, suggesting their interest in reading had extended beyond the digital realm.

Asked whether they enjoyed reading more after using the program, roughly a quarter of the students in the room raised their hands.

The informal feedback was far from scientific, but it offered a glimpse into how some students perceive impact of the program's gamified literacy approach.



A Jennings Public Schools student uses a program through the Shoelace Learning platform in October 2025. (Provided)

'Swiss cheese learning': Addressing adolescent literacy gaps

Platforms like Shoelace Learning are emerging as educators grapple with the persistent challenge of schoolchildren falling behind early in reading and remaining behind as academic demands increase. Recent state test results show that nearly three in four Oklahoma students are not proficient in reading by the end of third grade, with proficiency rates dropping to about 21 percent by eighth grade.

This year, those poor results spurred the Oklahoma Legislature to pass financial investments, science of reading initiatives and early literacy reforms, such as retention parameters for elementary students who fall shy of proficient marks on state tests.

Much of this year's conversation and negotiation focused on elementary grades, with the goal of ensuring students are proficient by third grade. However, educators note that older students who fall behind often have fewer targeted supports available.

"If you do not have [adequate literacy skills], you are going to have learning loss in any subject that you are presented in school," Grace said.

To address such gaps, OPSRC partnered with Shoelace Learning to pilot a program designed specifically for older students who are struggling as readers.

The platform embeds individualized reading exercises inside game-based environments. Students read passages and answer comprehension questions to earn in-game rewards, such as buildings or improvements to their digital "dwells," creating a direct connection between reading performance and gameplay progress.

Rivard Dexter, Shoelace's founder, said traditional approaches have often emphasized delivering curriculum rather than motivating students to engage with it.

"We are not focusing on engagement (as a system)," she said. "We are focusing on curriculum and content, and we have thrown so much at teachers and students over the years, and it is just not moving the needle."

At the core of her company's platform sits the idea that literacy growth requires both skill development and motivation.

Rivard Dexter described many struggling readers as having experienced what she calls "Swiss cheese learning," where skill gaps accumulate over time. As a result, Shoelace Learning's platform attempts to identify and address those gaps in real time.

"Based on where the kids are struggling, we can insert interventions in the moment," Rivard Dexter said.

Grace said pilot schools that implemented the platform have consistently reported strong engagement.

"The schools that have used it and done it with fidelity have just been super excited about it," Grace said.

How schools are using the platform

At Purcell Intermediate School, educators say the Shoelace Learning platform has helped them identify reading gaps and tailor instruction to individual students.

Principal Tina Swayze said the school began piloting the platform after teachers expressed a need for better intervention tools.

"The reason that we started with this in the very beginning was our teachers were needing intervention," Swayze said. "Where do I go to find a focused intervention piece that kids would (use to) drive their learning?"

The Shoelace Learning platform offers two programs or games — Dreamscape and Dreamseeker Drift — that assess students' reading levels and track comprehension skills over time, allowing teachers to identify where students need additional help.

"The whole purpose is to close that gap," Swayze said. "Or if they are already at that level, we want them to extend it."

Dawn Perigo, a fifth-grade language arts teacher who works with about 120 students in intervention groups, said the Shoelace Learning platform simplifies the process of identifying gaps.

"It gives them a baseline test so you know where they are at, and it reports back to me so I can monitor them," Perigo said. "If they are not doing well in a skill, I can pull them and work with them."

The system's data tools also help teachers manage large numbers of students.

"There is a lot of data we look at," Perigo said. "This really helps pinpoint certain areas."

Fifth grade reading teacher Tammie Mackey said Shoelace Learning allows teachers to tailor assignments to students at different reading levels.

"I can give them assignments that are very specific to whatever literacy skill we might be working on," Mackey said. "If Dawn is intervening with two or three students that I have in this hour, I can choose to give them a third-grade or fourth-grade assignment in the same skill."

The school began testing the program during a literacy tournament last year, and teachers said they quickly saw measurable gains. They said engagement, especially among students who struggle with traditional reading assignments, is one of the platform's biggest advantages.

"My class has grown about a grade and two months worth," Mackey said.

Some students have shown even larger gains.

"I have a student who has shown [nearly six] grades of growth," Mackey said. "I have another girl who has had about [five grades of] growth."

Mackey said those gains were measured over roughly a school year using the platform's internal assessment tools, which track changes in reading comprehension levels. While some students show large individual gains, Mackey said the overall class trend reflected steady improvement rather than dramatic jumps.

"No one has gone backwards," she said.

Measuring engagement and growth

During a three-week literacy tournament earlier this year, about 3,000 students across 15 Oklahoma schools used Shoelace's reading platform. Roughly 2,407 students were considered active, meaning they answered at least one question during the competition. Overall, students answered more than 1.1 million questions during the event.

Shoelace defines sustained participation — what it calls "fidelity" — as answering at least 25 questions per week with an accuracy rate above 50 percent. Students who met that benchmark showed the strongest literacy gains, with average reading comprehension growth equivalent to about three months of grade-level progress in the three-week period alone, according to company data.

Across all participants, average growth was smaller but still measurable, suggesting more modest gains among less consistent users.

Company representatives cautioned that those metrics are based on the platform's internal assessment system and are not directly comparable to statewide testing benchmarks.

In Purcell, Mackey's classroom averaged about 1.6 reading comprehension levels of growth over roughly a year and a half of consistent use.

The program costs about $1,000 per student, according to company representatives, a price point that could shape how widely it might be adopted. While the cost is lower than many high-intensity tutoring and intervention models, it still requires a significant investment for districts scaling their literacy supports.

Grace said one advantage of the platform involves the volume and immediacy of feedback teachers receive. Those responses provide a large data set for tracking student progress in real time.

"The insightful data that they get back from those reports helps them get another level of insight alongside other tools and other things that are obviously done in a classroom," Grace said.

Lawmakers weigh literacy strategies

At the Oklahoma Capitol, improving reading outcomes remains a central focus of education policy debates.

As schools explore digital learning tools, some lawmakers are simultaneously raising concerns about excessive screen time for students. HB 4358, which was introduced this year but never received a vote on the Senate floor, would limit screen time for students in pre-K through fifth grade to one hour per school day. If a similar bill were to become law in a future session, such a policy could impact how digital tools are used in classrooms.

But educators in Purcell say the Shoelace platform requires relatively limited screen time. The company itself recommends about 25 to 30 minutes of use across a five-day school week, giving teachers flexibility in its deployment alongside traditional reading instruction.

Teachers say some students even use the platform at home, applying it toward their allotted daily screen time.

"I have heard some of my fifth graders say, 'Well, I am allowed an hour each school day of screen time, so I take 20 minutes of my hour for Shoelace,'" Mackey said. "That is a huge win, because that is 20 minutes you are not on TikTok and Instagram."

This session, lawmakers passed an overhaul of the Strong Readers Act that seeks to improve early elementary literacy by enhancing intensive intervention practices. SB 1778 also altered the formula for SRA funds to incentivize improvement, and it reintroduced retention for struggling readers in third grade, a mechanism lawmakers have consistently characterized as a "last resort." Gov. Kevin Stitt signed the bill into law April 21.

"It is all about literacy," said Rep. Ronny Johns (R-Ada), a former educator. "It is all about reading scores and where that shakes out."

Johns said districts should have flexibility to adopt innovative approaches if they show evidence of improving student outcomes.

"If schools can find a program that works, then we need to be able to let them do that," he said.

He also emphasized that literacy challenges often begin well before third grade, repeating a common message: "You learn to read until the third grade, and then after the third grade, you are reading to learn."

Rep. Jacob Rosecrants (D-Norman), also a former teacher, said he would approach dramatic claims of literacy improvement with caution.

"If there was a silver bullet like that, it would be wonderful," Rosecrants said. "But what are we basing the success on? Is it test scores? Is it growth?"

He said Oklahoma's education system has become overly focused on testing, rather than fostering a love of reading.

"I would like to just see kids love reading again," Rosecrants said.

That goal aligns with Shoelace Learning's gamified approach. Still, Purcell educators emphasize that the program works best as part of a broader literacy strategy that includes independent reading, classroom instruction and teacher guidance.

"I think any reader you make stronger starts to find that love," Perigo said. "But the teacher still needs to be there to nurture the love."

For students building digital dwellings in Perigo's classroom, the game may simply be a new doorway into reading — one question a time.

Section 4

A Sustainable Education System

From Strong Readers to Strong Systems: A Blueprint for Oklahoma's Next Decade

April Grace, Ed.D., Executive Director and CEO, Oklahoma Public School Resource Center

Oklahoma education stands at a pivotal moment. Recent polling and the voices of parents across our communities deliver a clear, consistent message: families want strong academics, safe and supportive schools, and pathways to future success for their children. They are paying attention not simply to what schools offer, but to whether schools deliver meaningful results.

If I could advance one policy recommendation, it would be this: Oklahoma must commit to a shared, coherent vision built around five interconnected priorities—strong early literacy, future-ready mathematics, high-quality instruction and educator workforce development, connected data systems, and strategic acceleration. The most significant opportunity before us is aligning policy, practice, and people around this common framework. The most significant challenge is our historical tendency to pursue isolated initiatives rather than the coherent systems that produce lasting results. The five priorities described in this article are designed to address both.

At the same time, Oklahoma continues to face persistent challenges in student achievement, instructional consistency, and workforce readiness. While progress has been made—particularly through recent revisions to the Strong Readers Act—significant gaps remain. This moment calls for more than incremental change. It demands a shift from isolated initiatives toward coherent systems that ensure every student has access to excellent learning opportunities. The challenge before us is not a lack of programs or ideas. It is the need to align those efforts into a coherent system capable of delivering excellent outcomes for every learner.

What Oklahomans Are Telling Us

Recent polling of more than 1,100 Oklahomans provides both a reality check and a roadmap. While many families value their local schools, confidence in the system overall remains low. Only 29 percent of respondents rated their local schools as an A or B, and just 13 percent assigned Oklahoma's education system an A or B. Nearly two-thirds rated the state's educational performance a D or F.

Yet the same data reveals something equally important: Oklahomans are ready for solutions. Approximately 70 percent support increased school funding, more than 70 percent support higher teacher salaries, and 76 percent support annual statewide assessments. Seventy percent support policies tied to third-grade reading proficiency, and nearly two-thirds support a longer school year. These findings demonstrate that Oklahomans value both investment and accountability—and are willing to embrace meaningful changes that improve outcomes for children.

Building on Strengths, Addressing Gaps

Oklahoma possesses considerable strengths. The state has long been recognized for its commitment to early childhood education, and outstanding examples of innovation and excellence exist in schools and districts across the state. However, isolated examples of success are not enough. Sustainable improvement requires systems that consistently deliver high-quality experiences to students regardless of geography or circumstance.

The recent revision of the Strong Readers Act represents an important step forward, reinforcing what decades of research have demonstrated: reading proficiency by third grade remains one of the strongest predictors of future academic success. But policy alone does not drive outcomes—effective implementation does. Success depends upon ensuring that evidence-based literacy practices are consistently supported and delivered across classrooms and schools throughout the state.

That lesson has become increasingly clear through the work of the Oklahoma Public School Resource Center (OPSRC). For more than a decade, OPSRC has served as a bridge between statewide priorities and local classrooms by providing professional learning, technical assistance, leadership development, and cost-effective services to public school districts across Oklahoma. Whether supporting districts as they implement literacy reforms, strengthen instructional practices, adopt high-quality instructional materials, or leverage data to drive improvement, the lesson remains the same: policy alone is insufficient. Lasting improvement occurs when educators have the tools, training, and support necessary to translate expectations into action.

In many ways, the challenge facing Oklahoma is not simply identifying what works. The challenge is ensuring that effective practices are consistently supported, implemented, and sustained across diverse communities and contexts. Bridging the gap between aspiration and execution may be one of the most important opportunities before us.

Mathematics: The Next Frontier

While literacy has rightly received significant attention, mathematics represents the next frontier. Today's students need more than procedural fluency. They need opportunities to develop quantitative reasoning, data literacy, mathematical modeling, and the ability to solve authentic problems in a rapidly changing world. In short, students need access to the "math that matters."

Yet Oklahoma currently lacks several critical components necessary to support improved mathematics outcomes,

including a statewide universal screener and a coherent intervention framework comparable to those emerging in literacy. Improving mathematics achievement will require more than doing more of what we have always done. It will require rethinking what mathematics students need to learn, why it matters, and how consistently those opportunities are provided.

A future-ready mathematics system would require many of the same components that have strengthened literacy efforts in recent years. A statewide universal screener could provide educators with timely information about students' mathematical understanding and identify learning gaps before they become barriers to future success. Coupled with a coherent intervention framework, districts could provide targeted support, acceleration, and enrichment based on student need rather than waiting for failure to occur.

Such a system should be designed with clear milestones across grade levels. By the end of elementary school, students should possess strong number sense and computational fluency. By middle school, they should be developing proportional reasoning, algebraic thinking, and the ability to interpret and use data. These competencies provide the foundation for success in Algebra I and increasingly serve as gateways to high school coursework, postsecondary opportunities, and workforce readiness.

Just as importantly, mathematics instruction should help students apply concepts to authentic problems, analyze information, and make evidence-based decisions. In an economy increasingly shaped by technology, artificial intelligence, and data, mathematical literacy has become far more than preparation for advanced coursework. It is preparation for informed citizenship and participation in a rapidly changing world.

High-Quality Instruction: A Powerful Lever for Improvement

One of the most immediate and scalable opportunities for improvement lies in the use of high-quality instructional materials aligned to standards and research-based practices. While policy discussions often focus on accountability and structural reforms, the daily experience of students in classrooms remains the most powerful influence on learning. High-quality instructional materials support teachers, reduce unnecessary variability, and ensure students have access to grade-level content and rigorous expectations. Paired with strong instructional coaching, these materials provide one of the most scalable pathways for improving teaching and learning across diverse contexts. If Oklahoma seeks more consistent outcomes, ensuring more consistent access to high-quality instruction is an essential place to begin.

Time, Data, and Learning from Others

Another challenge hiding in plain sight is instructional time. Oklahoma students spend fewer days in school than students in many other states, and polling indicates that 63 percent of Oklahomans support a longer school year. Time alone will not solve achievement challenges, but insufficient time constrains opportunities for intervention, acceleration, and deeper learning.

Oklahoma also has much to learn from neighboring states. Arkansas' LEARNS initiative has demonstrated that meaningful improvement rarely results from isolated programs. Early gains across subjects suggest the power of coherent systems that align instruction, intervention, educator support, and accountability around common goals. The lesson for Oklahoma is not to replicate another state's approach wholesale but to recognize that sustained improvement occurs when policy, practice, and people are aligned around a common purpose.

That same principle applies to data. Oklahoma does not suffer from a lack of information; rather, it suffers from fragmented systems that make information difficult to translate into action. A statewide longitudinal data dashboard could provide the infrastructure necessary to connect strategy to results, allowing educators and policymakers to follow progress from early childhood through postsecondary education and into workforce success. Such a system is not about compliance—it is about creating a transparent, responsive, and continuously improving education system. Ultimately, better data should not simply help us measure performance. It should help us improve it.

One Vision. Five Priorities.

If I could advance one recommendation for Oklahoma, it would be a commitment to a shared vision built around five priorities that, taken together, provide both the strategy and infrastructure necessary to improve outcomes at scale.

1. Strong Early Literacy

Oklahoma has made important progress through the Strong Readers Act. The next step is ensuring that evidence-based literacy practices are implemented consistently across classrooms and schools so that every student develops the foundational skills necessary for long-term success. This work begins well before kindergarten. Research consistently demonstrates that the earliest years of a child's life are foundational to long-term learning. Strengthening the connections between early childhood programs—including home visiting, childcare, and PreK—and the K–3 classroom experience is essential to ensuring that children arrive ready to learn and that no child faces unnecessary barriers to reading proficiency. Oklahoma's longstanding commitment to early childhood education is an asset; the opportunity is to build more intentional bridges between early learning and elementary school success.

2. Future-Ready Mathematics

Mathematics represents Oklahoma's next frontier. Students need more than procedural fluency; they need opportunities to develop quantitative reasoning, data literacy, mathematical modeling, and real-world problem-solving skills. A modernized approach to mathematics, coupled with univer-

sal screening and stronger intervention systems, will help ensure that students are prepared for college, careers, and life.

3. High-Quality Instruction and Educator Workforce Development
High-quality instructional materials and instructional coaching offer one of the most immediate and scalable opportunities for improvement. Providing educators with strong tools and ongoing support can reduce variability across classrooms and ensure that students experience rigorous, standards-aligned instruction regardless of where they attend school.

None of these priorities will succeed without investing in the people who bring them to life. Supporting and developing Oklahoma's educators must remain at the center of any strategy for improving outcomes. Strengthening the educator workforce—from preparation and recruitment to professional learning, coaching, and leadership development—will be essential to ensuring that Oklahoma's students have access to excellent teaching in every community.

Achieving that goal requires attention to the systems that attract, develop, and retain talented educators. Expanding teacher preparation pathways, strengthening grow-your-own initiatives, and investing in leadership development can help build a sustainable pipeline for the future. Equally important is ensuring that educators receive ongoing support throughout their careers.

Structured instructional coaching frameworks represent one of the most powerful and underutilized levers for improving both teacher effectiveness and retention. High-quality coaching provides educators with job-embedded support, strengthens instructional practices, and creates opportunities for continuous growth. For early-career teachers in particular, strong coaching and mentoring can reduce burnout, increase confidence, and improve long-term retention.

These supports are especially important in rural and geographically diverse states like Oklahoma, where access to professional learning opportunities can vary significantly. By creating systems that support educators wherever they serve, Oklahoma can strengthen instructional quality, reduce unnecessary variability, and ensure that students across the state benefit from excellent teaching.

4. Connected Data Systems
A statewide longitudinal data dashboard would provide actionable information from early childhood through postsecondary education and workforce success. Such a system would move Oklahoma from fragmented data collection to data clarity, enabling educators and policymakers to identify what is working, intervene earlier, and scale successful practices.

5. Strategic Acceleration
Students learn at different rates and require different levels of support. Expanding access to intervention, high-impact tutoring, and additional learning opportunities will help ensure that students receive the right support at the right time and prevent temporary learning gaps from becoming permanent barriers. Equity must be at the center of this work. Students from low-income families, students with disabilities, English learners, and students in rural and geographically isolated communities face additional barriers that require intentional policy responses. Strategic acceleration means ensuring that excellence is not reserved for some zip codes or some students—it means building systems that extend high-quality opportunities to every learner, in every community across Oklahoma.

Together, these five priorities represent more than a collection of initiatives. They constitute a coherent blueprint for Oklahoma's next decade—one designed to ensure that excellence is not the exception, but the expectation for every learner.

No single organization, policy, or initiative will be sufficient. Lasting progress will depend on our willingness to align around shared goals and a common commitment to Oklahoma's children.

A Call to Alignment

Ultimately, systems do not improve themselves. People improve systems.

Sustainable improvement depends upon attracting, developing, and supporting the educators and leaders who bring these priorities to life every day.

Oklahoma does not lack commitment, innovation, or public support. In fact, the data suggests the opposite. Oklahomans are ready to invest, willing to expect more, and eager to support meaningful change. What is needed now is focus. This conversation is not about rankings. It is about ensuring that every child, regardless of where they live, has access to excellent teaching, meaningful learning, and a future filled with possibility.

As leaders gather for the 2026 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall, the work ahead will require collaboration across agencies, sectors, and communities. Oklahoma's future will not be determined by any single initiative, law, or leader. Lasting improvement occurs when policy, practice, and people work together around a common purpose.

The opportunity before us is not simply to replicate another state's success or improve our standing in national rankings. It is to build a system worthy of Oklahoma's children. The question facing Oklahoma is not whether change is necessary.

The question is whether we are willing to build the coherent systems that make lasting change possible.

One Vision. Five Priorities. A Stronger Future for Every Learner.

A Back-to-Basics Agenda for Oklahoma Schools

Adam Tyner, Oklahoma Center for Education Policy

State leaders often say that Oklahoma needs to go "back to the basics" in its public education system. But what would that really mean? In this brief, I argue that "back to basics" should mean refocusing schools on academic fundamentals, strengthening academic rigor, and rebuilding the conditions that make learning possible.

The case for change in Oklahoma is urgent. Oklahoma's 2024 NAEP results placed the state 48th in the country, with the state's lowest reading scores since the 1990s.[1] Oklahoma has already begun responding through early literacy policy. The Strong Readers Act emphasizes scientifically based reading instruction and early intervention, and the state has launched Science of Reading Academies to support up to 10,000 educators with evidence-based reading practices. But early literacy is only the beginning.[2]

A back-to-basics agenda should pair the science of reading with knowledge-rich curriculum, orderly classrooms, better targeted technology, honest grading, credit recovery guardrails, and faster, more useful transparency about learning outcomes.

First, Oklahoma should strengthen early literacy around the science of reading while broadening literacy beyond phonics. Recent legislation has put Oklahoma on a path towards improving early literacy, but the state should not define literacy as phonics alone. Phonics is powerful, but reading comprehension depends on vocabulary and background knowledge in a range of subjects, including history, geography, science, literature, and civics.[3] To build on our progress on literacy, Oklahoma should revise its literacy curricula list to encourage high quality, knowledge-building curricula are used in every Oklahoma classroom, as states such as Louisiana,[4] Ohio,[5] and Tennessee[6] have done. The state should also take steps to ensure that science, social studies, and civics are systematically taught in the state's elementary schools and should consider bringing back social studies end-of-grade testing in selected elementary and middle school grades.

Second, Oklahoma should protect orderly classrooms. Learning depends on attention, and attention depends on order. Oklahoma has already taken an important step with its "Bell to Bell, No Cell" law, which made the public school cell phone ban permanent this year.[7] Yet classrooms are often disorderly not just because of phones, but because of student misbehavior, which creates distractions from student learning and an added burden on teachers. Classroom behavior cannot be micromanaged from Oklahoma City, but state policy can make clear that well-behaved students have a right to learn in orderly classrooms and that teachers and principals should be supported when they enforce reasonable standards of behavior. Oklahoma should study models from other states that clarify teacher authority while preserving local flexibility. Florida's Teachers' Bill of Rights, for example, allows a teacher to remove a student whose behavior interferes with the teacher's ability to teach or classmates' ability to learn, and it limits the student's return to that classroom without the teacher's consent.[8] Oklahoma should adopt a similar approach and make it clear that teachers have the right to maintain order on their classrooms.

Third, Oklahoma should scale down and better target education technology in the early grades. Technology can help when it serves a clear instructional purpose, but it is a poor substitute for direct instruction, handwriting, discussion, books, math practice, and teacher feedback. And let's face it: the promises of education technology have rarely been fulfilled.[9] For young children especially, technology should be used more sparingly, rather than being the default content delivery mechanism. Accordingly, school districts should re-center many classrooms around paper and pencils and dial back screen-based instruction in early grades. The state should consider prohibiting device dependency (including "1:1" programs) in K-2 except for specific accommodations, targeted interventions, or specialized programs.

Fourth, Oklahoma should adopt a uniform grading policy to monitor and deter grade inflation and regulate so-called "credit recovery" programs. Grades are the main academic signal parents receive, but grade inflation makes that signal less reliable. When grades rise without corresponding learning gains, parents, students, teachers, colleges, and employers become misinformed.[10] This has clear consequences for students: Without clear information that students are struggling, students don't know they need to course-correct and parents don't know to intervene.

To make learning outcomes more transparent, Oklahoma should create a statewide uniform grading policy, drawing in part from South Carolina's long-standing model, which applies across the state's public schools.[11]

Such a policy should require common numeric grade bands, rules for weighting honors/AP/IB/dual-credit courses, transcript clarity, grade reporting to the state, and an annual grading audit conducted by the Office of Educational Quality and Accountability or a university that compares teacher-assigned course grades with state assessment results. It should also put guardrails around "credit recovery" programs. A Tulsa World article from a few years ago reported that some Tulsa Public Schools students received "an entire semester's worth of credit for a class in a single day." Evidence of quality problems in credit recovery programs is accumulating,[12] but common sense says that these programs are a key threat to academic rigor and require strict quality controls.

Finally, Oklahoma should make learning more transparent through improved end-of-year assessments. To return testing

to its basic function of providing transparency about student learning, the state should make two simple changes.
First, state law should require OSTP results to be published early in the summer. Oklahoma's public reporting of test results has often arrived late in the fall, which is too late for the results to be informative for parents, teachers, students, or school leaders.[13]

Second, Oklahoma should eliminate the four 11th grade CCRA assessments and implement a set of course-aligned high school tests in their place.[14] North Carolina offers a useful model: its end-of-course (EOC) exams measure mastery of specific course content, and state policy requires operational EOC results to count for at least 20 percent of the student's final course grade.[15] Oklahoma should adopt EOCs in at least the core courses of Algebra I, Biology, and U.S. History, with results reported as part of the state testing system and counting for 20 to 25 percent of students' final grades. This would provide external checks on grades, strengthen student incentives for mastery, and give parents and policymakers transparent information about what students have actually learned. And it would reduce testing, as the new EOCs would replace the final exams that students would have taken in those courses anyway.

A back-to-basics agenda is not anti-technology, anti-innovation, or opposed to students building soft skills, such as social and emotional competencies. Instead, it places rigorous academics at the center of school life. Oklahoma schools should be places where students read real books, learn history and science, acquire civic knowledge, receive honest grades, earn credits that mean something, and keep their phones out of sight. These are not old-fashioned goals. They are the minimum conditions for a serious education system.

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The Case for Holding Students Accountable

Adam Tyner, Oklahoma Center for Education Policy, and Michael J. Petrilli, Thomas B. Fordham Institute

How extrinsic motivation gets kids to work harder and learn more

Sometimes it seems as if we've tried everything in our efforts to reform public education, yet nothing has worked to boost student achievement at scale. And despite all of our reform attempts, we have ignored one of the most promising catalysts for student success.

What is this magical, elusive factor?

Student effort.

As education economists John H. Bishop and Ludger Woessmann have put it, "Student effort is probably the most important input in the education process."

The principle is simple: when students work harder, they learn more. In the United States, though, we don't expect most kids to work very hard, and they don't. For all of the talk about "raising standards" and implementing "high stakes testing," the United States is an outlier among developed nations when it comes to holding students themselves to account, and linking real-world consequences to academic achievement or the lack thereof.

In this article, we look at the evidence that external motivation can encourage middle-school and high-school students to work harder and learn more. We then identify a number of state and local policies that could put constructive pressure on students to exert effort in their academics. Such policies include instituting external, curriculum-based exams linked to real-world consequences for kids; maintaining high standards for earning good grades; and experimenting with well-designed cash-incentive programs. We conclude by considering how student accountability and student agency might combine for an even more effective approach in the future.

Students as Stakeholders

It might seem obvious that students have the biggest stake in their academic success. Education is correlated with future income and important measures of quality of life, and it is the students themselves who will eventually reap the benefits of their efforts in school—or the costs of their indifference. But the operative word here is eventually. To many adolescents, the adult future feels far away, uncertain, and generally unrelated to mastering algebra, understanding the stages of mitosis, or identifying dangling participles.

When even adults debate the payoffs of academic learning, it should be no surprise that many students do not see the "real world" relevance of their schoolwork. But even when they believe in the value of academics, teenagers may still prefer to spend their energy on the more-compelling activities competing for their attention — friends, sports, afterschool jobs, Snapchat, video games, not to mention less-wholesome pursuits. Delaying gratification is hard for most anyone, but researchers have shown that young people are especially present-focused, averse to planning for the longer term and struggling to overcome the impulse to procrastinate. The education system puts students in a position where, as Alexandra Usher and Nancy Kober of the Center on Education Policy expressed it, the "costs are up-front . . . while the benefits are delayed and sometimes difficult to grasp."

The question is, what might be done to motivate adolescent students to work harder? The optimistic — one might say unrealistic — answer is to make schools so engaging, and the student-teacher relationship so supportive, that adolescents will be intrinsically motivated to work hard, despite the other demands on their time and attention, and despite the social costs they might pay.

Yet it's hard for policymakers such as governors, legislators, and even school board members to move the needle on students' intrinsic motivation. They can try to do so indirectly, via initiatives to recruit and retain talented teachers, to implement high-quality curricula, or to include measures of student engagement in school accountability systems. But those are all bank shots at best.

Another approach — one that we believe is more realistic — is to hold students themselves accountable for their performance by ensuring that their work is tied to real consequences. This approach is based in research and used throughout much of the world. By giving students a greater and more immediate stake in their schoolwork and their learning, such student-accountability policies could bridge the gap between effort and reward.

Accountability Boosts Effort

Even when they believe in the value of academics, teenagers may still prefer to spend their energy on the more- compelling activities competing for their attention—friends, sports, afterschool jobs, Snapchat, video games, not to mention less-wholesome pursuits.

The case for holding students accountable for their schoolwork and their learning has been undercut by the prevalent belief that incentives and other "extrinsic" motivators actually decrease student effort by eroding students' intrinsic desire to learn. Psychologists in the 1970s discovered how extrinsic motivators could sometimes undermine intrinsic drive, and this idea has been widely popularized, most famously by Alfie Kohn's 1993 book Punished by Rewards. Kohn and other education writers demonstrated how incentives can backfire, and they bolstered their cases with memorable anecdotes of daffy incentive initiatives, such as a Denver Planned Parent-

hood program's offer to pay teenage girls a dollar a day not to get pregnant.

Yet these writers overstated the case against external motivators. The psychology literature never supported their blanket claims that "incentive plans cannot work," as Kohn put it in the Harvard Business Review, and the conditions under which external motivators backfire are, according to a 1996 meta-analysis on the topic, "limited and easily remedied." The evidence that external accountability lowers student motivation is mixed. Researchers found that external exams in Germany caused students to work harder, increased their performance, and made students more likely to want a job involving math, but the researchers also found that exams negatively affected students' enjoyment of math and feelings of competence. When Bishop examined the effects of high-school exit exams, one traditional form of external accountability, on intrinsic motivation by comparing whether students subjected to this approach engaged in less reading for pleasure or were more likely to associate learning with rote memorization, he found no evidence that accountability undermined natural curiosity and even found some evidence of the opposite. The logic of Bishop's finding is that systems that incentivize students to master academic material may in fact increase intrinsic drive, an unsurprising result for those of us who see learning as empowering.

Another way accountability can boost intrinsic motivation is by supporting pro-academic norms. As James Coleman observed as early as 1959, students often gang up to pick on the "curve raiser": when students are graded on a curve relative to one another, those who work hard and raise the class average make things difficult for other students, who must then work harder for their grades (see "The Adolescent Society," features, Winter 2006). This situation has been explored more recently by other social scientists, who have found that it can lead to social norms under which "nerds" are harassed and studious students of color are accused by their peers of "acting white" (see "'Acting White,'" features, Winter 2006).

Smart student-accountability systems can help solve this problem—by setting high academic standards and, most crucially, by using external assessments to evaluate student progress. This means that policymakers may positively influence intrinsic motivation by optimizing student incentives, resulting in more pro-academic social norms as well as increased student interest and competence. In more recent years, behavioral economists have used experimental methods to better understand the connections between external motivation and human behavior and avoid the pitfalls Kohn and others have flagged. We discuss this further below, but behavioral economics has provided new experimental evidence that policymakers should be sensitive to the timing of accountability, ensure that positive incentives are not too small, and target students at the right ages.

And regardless of the interaction with intrinsic drive, external motivators can have powerful positive effects on student learning in their own right.

External Exams

Important evidence for the effect of student accountability on effort and achievement comes from the literature on curriculum-based external assessments. Several studies from the late 1990s and early 2000s support a strategy of using such external exams, showing that countries, Canadian provinces, and American and German states using content-based external exams for student accountability outperformed comparison jurisdictions, most likely because increased student stakes led to greater student effort. Yet such external exams have many forms and have not been equally successful in all contexts.

Substantial evidence from around the world has linked high-school exit exams to increased learning, but in the United States, where political pressures to relax graduation requirements have always kept the passing bar low, the evidence for their benefit has been inconclusive. Studies have variously found small positive effects, small negative effects, or, often, no effects. American researchers have also focused on whether such exams might induce students to drop out, with several studies finding greater dropout rates following the adoption of the exams.

Yet such pass-or-fail exams are not the only way to use external assessments to promote student accountability. In a recent paper, Anne Hyslop makes a case against the use of exit exams but argues that external assessments can be used in other ways to promote student accountability. In the past 20 years, many states have begun to require external end-of-course exams (EOCs) covering core subjects such as algebra, biology, and American history, often with consequences attached to a student's performance. Some states have made passing the exams a condition for graduation, essentially turning them into exit exams, but others have increased the stakes for students instead by printing the EOC scores on student transcripts or factoring the scores into course grades. As with external exams in many other countries, EOC results here are typically reported in terms of specific performance thresholds (such as advanced, proficient, needs improvement) rather than as simple pass-or-fail grades, enabling clearer signals of academic performance. This more-nuanced form of signaling also increases the stakes for students, since it gives college admissions officers and potential employers additional information with which to evaluate candidates—an especially important factor in an era of grade inflation. While such a system is not yet mature in the United States, EOCs could form a powerful mechanismfor student accountability if adopted on a broader scale.

The benefits of external assessments are clear for the students enrolling in Advanced Placement and other elite programs that are trusted by colleges in large part because they are externally validated. AP helps solve the "curve raiser" problem by setting an external standard that is not controlled by the teacher, and one that all students in a given class can potentially meet. AP exams are graded by faraway educators, and high scores can earn students valuable college credit. In a sense, this turns preparing for AP exams into a team sport,



Each fall, high schools in Texas's Garland Independent School District host pep rallies to recognize students passing their AP exams and earning checks through NMSI's program.

giving the nerds permission to study hard and crush the test. It also breaks down the pernicious "avoidance treaties" between teachers and students, which Arthur B. Powell of Rutgers University has warned about: that is, the tacit agreement in some high schools that teachers won't expect much of students, and vice versa. Without bargaining among students or between the students and the teachers, no one has an incentive to lower standards.

Yet even with the expansion of the AP program in recent years, only about a third of American students take at least one exam, and less than a quarter pass at least one test with a score of three or higher. The promise of high-quality EOCs is to extend the benefits of external assessment, and its virtuous cycle, to many more teenagers.

And non-elite students may disproportionately benefit from smart student-accountability policies, such as EOCs combined with real stakes for the students. Since incentives and external motivators have the strongest impact on students with low initial intrinsic motivation, such programs will have an outsized impact on low-achieving students, whose intrinsic motivation is often lower.

Additionally, the power of strong signals of academic performance—enabled by meaningful grades and test scores—has greater importance for students trapped in low-performing schools. Without meaningful signals of achievement, these students can excel yet have difficulty distinguishing themselves from their peers. Research shows that minorities accrue greater premiums from educational credentials that signal high achievement than whites, which means that watering down these signals through grade inflation, abolishing external exams, and lowering standards depletes a key resource for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. These students often lack the family connections and other advantages their more-affluent peers depend on, making academic signals even more important.

Don't Forget the Carrots

Requiring students to pass end-of-course exams is certainly an eat-your-broccoli approach to student accountability. Carrots are worth considering, too.

Take, for example, the College Readiness Program of the National Math and Science Initiative (NMSI). Offering substantial cash rewards to students and their teachers, the NMSI program has helped hundreds of thousands of students from low-income families succeed in Advanced Placement coursework. Cash incentives for students have a mixed record, with researchers generally finding greater effects when behaviors (such as reading books) rather than outcomes (such as end-of-year test scores) are incentivized. Yet robust evaluations of NMSI's program, conducted by the economist Kirabo Jackson, show how incentivizing outcomes can powerfully affect both short- and long-term student outcomes, particularly when coupled with teacher support (see "Cash for Test Scores," features, Fall 2008). In this case, teachers play an especially important role, because even if incentives increase student effort, their work will not bear fruit if the students don't understand how to achieve the desired outcome.

Jackson's evaluations of the NMSI program show that it increases college attendance by 4.2 percentage points while increasing college readiness as well as longer-term workforce outcomes. For some students, the effects are particu-

larly strong: Hispanic students see an impressive 11 percent gain in earnings when exposed to the incentive program. Although pay-for-performance policies have often targeted teachers and administrators, NMSI's program demonstrates that including the students themselves in such policies, if done right, can have game-changing effects.

Policymakers thinking of adopting cash incentive programs should take to heart the lessons of behavioral economics. One rule put forth by Bradley Allan and Roland Fryer in a 2011 white paper on education incentives is, "Don't be cheap." A distant incentive that amounts to pennies per hour for increased effort is more likely to make students indignant that their work is not being valued than to stimulate additional effort. Timing is also critical. While we want students to develop greater self-control and the ability to delay gratification, assisting them in the mastery of academic skills requires that we chop some tasks into smaller chunks and help students overcome procrastination by offering shorter-term rewards. To optimize these policies, education policymakers should continue to examine the latest from psychology and behavioral economics.

Lowered Expectations

While end-of-course exams and cash incentives carry great promise, other current "reforms" actually serve to discourage student effort. The most concerning trend is the push to reduce teachers' authority to assign low grades for poor performance or late assignments. A number of districts nationwide have adopted "no zeroes" policies, banning grades lower than a 50 or 60 on any given assignment or exam, under the rationale that such low grades could make it mathematically impossible for students to recover. Several districts have also implemented "mandatory retake" policies, requiring that teachers allow students to retake exams or redo assignments if they receive a low grade the first time.

Perhaps the intentions behind these policies are pure, but they amount to the soft bigotry of low expectations when it comes to student effort and responsibility. Kids soon figure out that they can procrastinate on assignments or studying for exams without having to face the music, at least in the short term. Teachers lose a valuable tool for discouraging that kind of behavior and promoting effort and diligence. When schools expect less and less of students, we shouldn't be surprised that students game the system.

Accountability and Agency

A focus on student effort and accountability may sound old-fashioned in an era when personalized, "competency-based education" is all the rage. But here's the good news: the two go together like peanut butter and jelly.

Consider, for example, an experiment conducted by the behavioral economist Dan Ariely: in one of his courses, he set a different policy for turning in assignments in each of three class sections. One section of students could turn in their assignments at any point during the semester, including the last day; the second group had deadlines spaced across the term; and students in the third section had the option of pre-committing to deadlines of their own choosing—deadlines that, if missed, would result in consequences for the students. In that third section, where students could choose restrictions or absolute freedom, all students chose some restrictions, voluntarily setting up consequences for themselves that enabled the instructor to hold them accountable. In other words, almost all the students with a choice opted for accountability that had teeth. And they were smart to do so, because it was those in the section with maximum freedom and no accountability for deadlines who performed worst on the class assignments. Middle-school and high-school students may sometimes require a more paternalistic approach, but Ariely's experiment shows that accountability does not necessarily have to be imposed from the top down.

A promise of introducing new technology into classrooms is that it will customize and personalize a student's experience, often by increasing her choice. Student accountability enables a kind of "loose-tight" management of students, by which they are afforded greater flexibility over how to acquire a set of knowledge and skills (loose) and held strictly accountable for their outcomes (tight). Giving students greater agency over their learning and allowing them to move at their own pace may boost student interest and allow students to learn more quickly and efficiently. But we shouldn't naively assume that most students will put in the effort to make these new systems work without caring adults guiding them and holding them accountable. It's telling that the darling of personalized-learning aficionados, Summit Public Schools, makes extensive use of the Advanced Placement program in its high schools (see "Pacesetter in Personalized Learning," features, Fall 2017). The high standards, external exams, and incentives baked into the AP program provide effective mechanisms for holding students accountable for working hard and making progress.

Unfortunately, too many policymakers are moving schools in the wrong direction by removing the few tools, such as meaningful grading standards and high-quality end-of-course exams, that might encourage more student effort.
Students benefit from accountability, and, given the right circumstances, they choose it. As reformers and entrepreneurs seek new applications of technology and innovative models of instruction to revolutionize education systems, schools must reassess their comparative advantages. In their roles as academic-community builders and the gatekeepers of credentials, school leaders should embrace the responsibility of holding students accountable.

This article appeared in the Summer 2018 issue of Education Next.

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Education Themes in 2025 State of the State Addresses

Seth Gerson and Devon Nir, National Governors Association, April 2, 2025

As Governors across the country have taken the podium to deliver their 2025 State of the State addresses, they have used this platform to spotlight one of their largest and most consequential budget line items: education. They have celebrated key achievements in education, introduced new education initiatives, and outlined bold visions for the future of education in their states.

This is a particularly exciting year for education. NGA Chair Colorado Governor Jared Polis has launched his Let's Get Ready!: Educating All Americans for Success Chair's Initiative, empowering Governors to reimagine their education systems and elevate reforms that help students thrive in our rapidly evolving economy. Per Governor Polis' own State of the State address:

"This year, I have the honor of serving as Chair of the bipartisan National Governors Association. My Chair's Initiative, Let's Get Ready: Educating All Americans for Success, is all about preparing students for real life and our economy for real success. We're looking at how we can best ensure learners develop the skills and talents they need to succeed in today and tomorrow's job market."~ Governor Jared Polis

As of mid-March, at least 49 Governors have delivered State of the State addresses. Examining these speeches offers valuable insights into the trends that are shaping education in the U.S. today. That is why for the past six years, the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Education Commission of the States (ECS) have partnered to publish a report on the education issues raised in Governors' State of the State addresses. Across this year's speeches, we have pinpointed seven major education policy trends that are driving Governors' agendas: K–12 funding, workforce development and career and technical education, teacher workforce, academic achievement, school choice, early care and education, and mental and physical health. We have also identified cell phones in schools as an emerging trend.

This commentary features highlights from Governors' State of the State and other state addresses that showcase each of these trends.

K–12 Funding

At least 32 Governors touched on funding for K–12 education in their state addresses, whether recognizing new investments or outlining updates to the state's funding formula. This includes Governor Leon Guerrero of Guam, who dedicated $8.5 million of the territory's latest budget to maintaining school facilities. In Maine, Governor Mills celebrated meeting the state's obligation to pay 55 percent of local education costs in 2021 and budgeting an additional $156 million to continue this commitment. Governor Kehoe of Missouri recommended a $200 million increase to Missouri's Foundation Formula—the state's funding allocation model since 2005—and announced a School Funding Modernization Task Force to rewrite this formula. In Nebraska, Governor Pillen also prioritized improving the state's school funding system, seeking to make changes to its thirty-year-old formula (TEEOSA) and announcing plans to establish a blue ribbon commission to recommend a new model. In New Hampshire, Governor Ayotte highlighted her budget's $98.8 million dollar investment in special education—a nearly 50 percent increase from the previous biennium. Governor Kotek of Oregon elevated efforts to change how the Current Service Level funding for the State School Fund is calculated and explained that her proposed budget will help school districts with their base funding. Governor Scott of Vermont also addressed the state's funding formula and shared details about his multi-year plan focused on a student-centered funding model, consolidation of the state's school districts, and support for local school boards throughout the transition. Finally, though he has yet to give a State of the State address, it is worth noting that Governor Meyer of Delaware has also taken a special interest in K–12 funding, pushing for a new funding formula by the start of the 2025–26 school year.

"As you know, we are proposing a new approach to education funding…Getting this formula right will benefit taxpayers and bring a high-quality education with more opportunities for all students from cradle to career." ~ Governor Phil Scott

Workforce Development and Career and Technical Education

At least 33 Governors discussed workforce development and career and technical education as ways to prepare students for in-demand careers and bolster the economy. Governor Little of Idaho celebrated the success of the Idaho LAUNCH program, which provides grants to students who pursue workforce training programs. In Massachusetts, Governor Healey commended the thousands of learners in the state's pathway programs and promised to continue to provide Early College and job training opportunities. In North Carolina, Governor Stein shared his goal to double the number of apprentices over the next four years, offer free community college for students who get certified in high-demand sectors, and create a Council on Workforce and Apprenticeships to better align community colleges, public schools, and local businesses. Governor Stitt of Oklahoma also stressed the need for more apprenticeships across the state, calling on businesses, schools, and universities to create 250 new opportunities before the end of the year. Governor Byran of the Virgin Islands announced that the Virgin Islands Technical College will open in Septem-

ber 2025. The institution will help students enter high-paying fields and address workforce shortages by giving high schoolers the opportunity to graduate with two-year college degrees and certifications. Moreover, some Governors who have yet to give a 2025 state address, including Governor Newsom of California and Governor Rhoden of South Dakota, are embracing this trend. Governor Newsom announced his Master Plan for Career Education, which outlines six strategies to strengthen career pathways and prioritize hands-on learning and real-life skills across California. Meanwhile, Governor Rhoden recently signed legislation to provide more equipment for the state's four technical colleges.

"Some Pennsylvanians join the workforce right out of high school. Some complete an apprenticeship. Some join the military. Some go to college. There are many paths to success, and we've got to respect and support all of them." ~ Governor Josh Shapiro

Teacher Workforce

At least 26 Governors highlighted educator workforce needs, including teacher recruitment, retention, and compensation strategies. For example, Governor DeSantis of Florida commended the state's record $4.6 billion budgeted to raise teacher salaries. In Hawaii, Governor Green linked the state's teacher shortage to its lack of affordable housing, underscoring his efforts to build more residencies for educators. In Indiana, Governor Braun elevated legislation that will raise the minimum salary for public school teachers by $5,000 and require that 65% of state tuition support goes to teacher compensation. Governor Moore of Maryland lamented the state's teacher shortage and touted his plans to launch a national campaign to recruit top educators and proposed building debt-free paths to teaching. In Pennsylvania, Governor Shapiro celebrated the creation of new student teacher stipends to help alleviate financial barriers incurred by pursuing a career as an educator Governor Abbott of Texas stated his goal to increase the average teacher's salary to an all-time high, noting that the best teachers deserve a path to a six-figure salary. In West Virginia, Governor Morrissey emphasized the importance of paying teachers more competitively than surrounding states to attract high-quality educators.

"As a son and a father of teachers, I'm well aware that teaching is one of the most noble professions. For too long, though, Montana teachers, especially those just beginning their careers, have not been compensated properly for their work. Over the last four years, we've worked together to boost starting teacher pay by establishing the TEACH Act. Building on the success of the TEACH Act, our budget invests a historic $100 million to raise teacher pay, with a focus on educators who are just starting their careers." ~ Governor Greg Gianforte

Academic Achievement

At least 24 Governors addressed student achievement in their states, including efforts around literacy, numeracy, and attendance. This includes Governor Ivey of Alabama, who celebrated the state's recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores for 4th graders in reading and pointed to the Alabama Literacy Act as one of the forces behind this achievement. She also highlighted the Alabama Numeracy Act, which has helped place hundreds of math coaches in schools, and touted the impact of her Turnaround Schools initiative. Governor Dunleavy of Alaska also lauded the state's progress in reading. Following the 2022 passage of the Alaska READS Act, the percentage of young learners in the state who met early literacy benchmarks grew from 41 percent to 57 percent—and Alaska students outpaced the national reading proficiency growth rate in kindergarten, first, and second grades. In Connecticut, Governor Lamont pointed to the Learner Engagement and Attendance Program (LEAP) as an effective strategy to combat chronic absenteeism. In New Mexico, Governor Lujan Grisham praised the state's Structured Literacy initiative and summer literacy programs, which enrolled 10,000 students and helped spur an 11% increase in reading proficiency. Rhode Island's Governor McKee spoke about the state's nationally recognized Attendance Matters campaign. Governor McKee has built on this campaign to launch a $2.85 million Math Matters initiative. Governor Youngkin of Virginia emphasized the Virginia Literacy Act and ALL In Virginia—which expands access to high-dosage academic tutoring—and their positive effects on early literacy outcomes and post-pandemic learning loss. In Wyoming, Governor Gordon discussed the Reimagining and Innovating the Delivery of Education (RIDE) initiative and how it has led to improved student outcomes. Though she has yet to give a state address since her inauguration, Governor González-Colón of Puerto Rico has also shown a clear interest in academic achievement, articulating a plan to foster a stronger focus on STEM throughout the island's schools.

"For the fundamentals, I thank the Legislature for being a partner with me in early literacy and summer learning investments. I really believe these solutions — retooling the way school districts teach our students how to read through incentivizing evidence-based practices and reducing learning disruption through reliable summer education programs — will make a difference in the future trajectory of our children and youth." ~ Governor Tina Kotek

School Choice

At least 21 Governors spoke about school choice and the need to provide quality educational opportunities for all students, whether by expanding the schooling options offered to families or by making sure those options are subject to thorough accountability. Governor Hobbs of Arizona called for increased accountability for the state's Education Savings Account (ESA) program, including income caps. In Kansas, Governor Kelly stressed the importance of investing in public schools and rejecting efforts decrease their funding, including by re-routing those funds to private schools. Governor Reeves of Mississippi advocated for continuing to give parents more choices for their children's

education. In Nevada, Governor Lombardo called himself a "big believer in school choice" and celebrated the expansion of transportation options for students who choose to attend charter schools. Though Louisiana's State of the State address is not scheduled until after the release of this commentary, Governor Landry has also voiced support for school choice. His proposed budget includes nearly $100 million for students participating in the state's ESA program during the 2025–26 school year.

Early Care and Education

At least 24 Governors discussed the educational opportunities for young children in their states. Governor Polis of Colorado applauded the state's jump from 27th to 7th in the nation for preschool enrollment and noted that the first class of universal preschool saved Colorado families an average of $6,100. Governor Reynolds of Iowa celebrated that more than two-thirds of the state's 4-year-olds are enrolled in some form of preschool. She also announced an Early Childhood "Continuum of Care" grant for preschool programs and childcare providers that integrate their services. In Kentucky, Governor Beshear called for universal pre-K for all 4-year-olds, stating that 54% of children in the state are showing up for kindergarten unprepared. Governor Murphy of New Jersey recognized the state's progress toward universal pre-K and spoke about his new proposal requiring school districts to provide full-day kindergarten in the communities that still lack it. In South Carolina, Governor McMaster proposed continued investment in the state-funded full-day 4K program, which has seen significant enrollment growth and benefits for children from low-income households. In Tennessee, Governor Lee highlighted his $11 million proposal to make childcare more accessible by partnering with the Boys and Girls Club to serve 7,500 low-income children and families across the state.

Mental and Physical Health

At least 21 Governors addressed the physical, mental, and behavioral health of students. Governor Kemp of Georgia praised the funding of behavioral and mental health programs that enabled a response to the tragic shooting at Apalachee High School in 2024. In New York, Governor Hochul discussed her "Unplug and Play" initiative, which encourages young people to replace time spent on social media with healthier alternatives—like youth sports, arts programs, and community building. She also proposed providing all children with free breakfast and lunch at school and highlighted efforts to prioritize youth mental health. Governor Armstrong of North Dakota called for an expansion of the Farm-to-School program, which encourages schools to source as much food from local producers as possible. Governor DeWine of Ohio elevated the efforts of the Children's Vision Strike Force, created to ensure that every child who needs glasses receives them, and announced the OhioSee Program to guarantee that those between kindergarten and third grade receive vision screenings. In Washington, Governor Ferguson expressed support for providing all K–12 students with free breakfast and lunch. Finally, Governor Walz of Minnesota—who has not yet given his 2025 State of the State Address—has prioritized providing free meals at school to all the state's nearly 900,000 public school students.

Cell Phones in Schools

Dubbed an emerging trend by NGA and ECS, at least 17 Governors talked about the harms associated with students' use of cell phones in schools. In Arkansas, Governor Sanders touted her Bell to Bell No Cell initiative to limit cell phone distractions for students both inside and outside of the classroom. Governor Pritzker of Illinois proposed a ban on cell phone use during classroom instruction, citing the impact on learning and a rise in cyberbullying. In Michigan, Governor Whitmer expressed her support for bipartisan legislation to limit the use of phones in class, pointing to data showing that these policies lead to "more learning and less bullying." In Montana, Governor Gianforte highlighted that his budget includes $1 million of one-time-only incentives for school districts to adopt cell phone-free policies. In his speech, Governor Cox of Utah also echoed the push to ban cell phones in schools.

As Governors continue to shape American education through policy decisions and strategic investments, their State of the State addresses offer a window into the priorities that will shape the years ahead. By tracking these trends, we get a firsthand look into how states are strengthening their education systems and better preparing students for success in an evolving world.

The Next Great Investment

Brent Bushey, CEO of Fuel OKC

What Fuel OKC Is and Why It Matters to Oklahoma City's Future

Every generation inherits the city shaped by the decisions and investments of those who came before it. In turn, each generation inherits the responsibility to leave the city stronger for those who follow. Some investments solve immediate challenges. Others quietly shape a community for decades, influencing where families live, where businesses invest, and whether future generations inherit greater opportunities than the last. Prosperity is rarely accidental. It is built through long-term vision, sustained civic leadership and a willingness to invest in the future.

Oklahoma City has demonstrated this principle through MAPS as citizens have invested not just in projects but in possibility. Parks, cultural institutions, downtown redevelopment, public infrastructure, and sports venues changed the city's physical landscape, but perhaps MAPS' greatest success was changing Oklahoma City's trajectory. It demonstrated that transformational change rarely happens by accident. It happens when a community identifies a shared priority, commits to measurable goals, and sustains that commitment over time. MAPS proved that Oklahoma City has the capacity to transform itself when citizens unite around a common vision.

Today, Oklahoma City faces a new defining opportunity. The metro area continues to grow, attracting employers, investment and new residents. Yet within the Oklahoma City Public Schools boundary, the number of residents ages 18 and younger has declined by 6% over the last 10 years[1]. If Oklahoma City's long-term prosperity depends on attracting and retaining young families, the city's next great investment should be its children.

Schools do more than educate children. They develop the human capital upon which every other public investment ultimately depends. Educational opportunity is not simply an education issue—it is foundational to economic development, workforce readiness, neighborhood vitality, and quality of life. That investment begins by increasing the number of children with access to high-quality schools that prepare them for successful lives.

Within the boundary of Oklahoma City Public Schools, there are 89 public schools that educate about 44,000 students. Fifty-eight schools are operated by the Oklahoma City Public School District and 31 by public charter schools. For Fuel OKC, we define a quality public school as one earning an A or B on Oklahoma's accountability Report Card. Using this benchmark, only 18 schools, serving one in five of the district's students, currently meet this measure.

The challenge is not proving that excellent public schools can exist—they already do. A 2023 Harvard study ranked Oklahoma's public charter sector sixth nationally in academic outcomes based on NAEP growth. Oklahoma also ranks second nationally for Hispanic student outcomes and third for Black student outcomes within the charter sector [2]. These results demonstrate that Oklahoma City is not starting from scratch. The city already possesses schools producing nationally competitive outcomes. The challenge before us is ensuring that many more children can benefit from that excellence.

Fuel OKC exists to increase the percentage of Oklahoma City children attending a quality public school. That mission reflects the organization's belief that the most meaningful measure of an education system is not how many schools it operates or programs it creates, but how many children have access to schools that prepare them for successful lives. For that reason, Fuel OKC believes Oklahoma City should embrace a bold civic aspiration: by the beginning of the 2030–2031 school year, at least half of all public school students within the Oklahoma City Public Schools boundary should attend a quality public school. This goal is intentionally centered on children rather than institutions because children—not organizations—are the ultimate beneficiaries of every educational decision Oklahoma City makes. Every investment, partnership, and policy should ultimately be measured by whether it expands academic success for more children.

Families are not searching for a particular governance model; they are searching for schools where their children will be challenged, supported, and prepared to succeed. Fuel OKC has seen this dynamic firsthand through Enroll OKC, a common public school application supported by Fuel that, for the first time, allowed families to apply to multiple public charter schools through a single process. To date, more than 3,900 families have accepted seats through Enroll OKC, and more than 85 percent of those accepted seats have been at schools earning an A or B on Oklahoma's accountability report card. Families were free to make their own decisions. Fuel simply made high-quality information and high-quality options easier to access. The results suggest that when barriers are reduced and families have clear, transparent information, they consistently choose higher-performing schools.

This experience reinforces a broader point. Oklahoma City's challenge is fundamentally one of access and capacity, not demand. The city already has schools producing exceptional outcomes; the task before us is ensuring that many more children have the opportunity to attend them. Fuel OKC believes the success of Oklahoma City's education system should ultimately be measured not by the

number of schools, programs, or initiatives it creates, but by the number of children's futures it changes.

No single investment will achieve this vision. Expanding educational opportunity requires strengthening schools, developing talent, empowering families, and advancing policies that encourage excellence. For that reason, Fuel OKC advances its mission through four connected strategies. First, we invest to help high-performing public schools expand, supporting schools with the capacity to improve, and encouraging new high-quality public schools where communities lack sufficient options. Second, we invest in talent to deepen the pipeline of outstanding teachers and future school leaders. Third, we empower families with reliable information and the tools to advocate effectively for their children. Finally, we advance policies that increase educational opportunity and expand access to high-performing public schools. These are not separate initiatives; they are complementary strategies working together to create lasting, systematic change.

Because Fuel OKC does not operate schools, authorize schools, or represent any single educational sector, it is uniquely positioned to align partners around a shared civic goal: expanding access to quality public schools. School districts, charter schools, colleges and universities, philanthropic organizations, employers, policymakers, educators, and families all have roles to play. Fuel OKC serves as an independent convener, catalyst, investor, and advocate, helping align those partners around a common civic objective. Our success will not be measured by the number of grants awarded, meetings convened, or reports published. It will be measured by whether the percentage of children attending quality public schools increases year after year.

Every generation inherits a city shaped by those who came before it. Every generation also leaves one behind. Previous generations transformed Oklahoma City by investing in its physical future. This generation has the opportunity to transform its human future by expanding opportunities for children. If we succeed, our legacy will not simply be the buildings we constructed or the programs we created. It will be a city where far more children have access to the education they need to thrive—and a stronger Oklahoma City because of it.

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Facilitating and Strengthening Educational Partnerships: Norman Chamber of Commerce and the Partners in Education Portal Project

Chan Klingensmith, VP of Community Development & Govt. Affairs, Norman Chamber of Commerce

How can a local business community help enhance the educational environment so students and teachers can be even more successful? One example is through the efforts of the Norman Chamber of Commerce in Norman, OK. The Norman Chamber and its membership have demonstrated a strong legacy of support of Norman Public Schools and staff through the history of their Partners in Education Program created by the Business & Education Committee.

When it was initially created, the Partners in Education program would help match Chamber businesses and organizations to specific elementary, junior high and high schools in their community. At an annual breakfast event, Chamber members would be able to hear from and meet with representatives from each school in the district. Chamber members would then sign up to be a partner with a specific school(s) and agree to provide financial support, participate in volunteer opportunities or give in-kind donations. The schools would then in turn thank these entities through banners, signs, company logos on student take home materials and other means that would be seen by parents, teachers and other community members. This would provide participating businesses with community exposure.

The COVID-19 pandemic's global impact on business, educational institutions, and cultural norms are well known. Through a local lens, it greatly impacted these community-based partnerships in Norman. The world collectively faced less opportunities for human interaction through events and volunteer opportunities and organizations changed their budgeting habits for charitable giving and community service endeavors. This disruption caused many of the partnerships between Chamber members and schools to dissolve.

In the spring of 2024, an effort was made by the Norman Chamber and their Business & Education Committee to reinvigorate their Partners in Education program. Schools still had many needs just as they did before the pandemic. Initially, efforts were made by the Committee to try to restart the Partners in Education program how it was originally structured, but it just did not take off. The Committee had many conversations about new ideas and ways to reestablish connections between businesses and the local schools. One step that was addressed was expanding the Committee and including more key stakeholders, including representatives from Norman Public Schools, the Norman Public Schools Foundation, the local PTA Council, Moore Norman Technology Center, the Pioneer Library System and other key community entities.

The committee eventually settled on creating a centralized Partners in Education portal system for school principals to submit specific projects. Projects would generally be centered around financial support, volunteer opportunities and in-kind donations. The idea was that Chamber members, businesses and organizations could access this portal to see these projects that have been submitted and select those they want to fulfill. The Committee felt it was imperative that this system be easy to use and user friendly; the committee did not want it to be a difficult process. It would require a log-in and password to be accessed by someone within the business community. The vision was the portal would be modeled after the popular Donors Choose fundraising platform but specifically for the local public school system. The hope was that as a company or business would learn more about the individual schools they were helping with and connections would grow from there.

Norman Public Schools saw the potential value in this idea and allowed one of their information technology staff to create and host the portal on the NPS website. The designer and builder of the website constructed it during their own time for a minimal fee. The Committee is raising the funds to pay for the developer's time and work.

Over a period of several months, the developer worked with the Committee and NPS staff to create, adjust and update the portal site. Several demonstrations were held to maximize the site's functionality and accessibility. It was determined that all projects submitted by principals would be first reviewed and approved by an NPS administrator. This is to make sure the project fits the purpose of the portal and would not be better suited for another entity such as the Norman Public Schools Foundation or their school PTA organization.

As of June 2026, the initial Partners in Education Portal is active and is starting to have projects submitted by school principals. Throughout the summer the Chamber will be working on plans for promoting its use and marketing it to their membership through emails, video, specific events and other direct messaging. The full launch of the portal is planned with the start of the 2026-2027 school year.

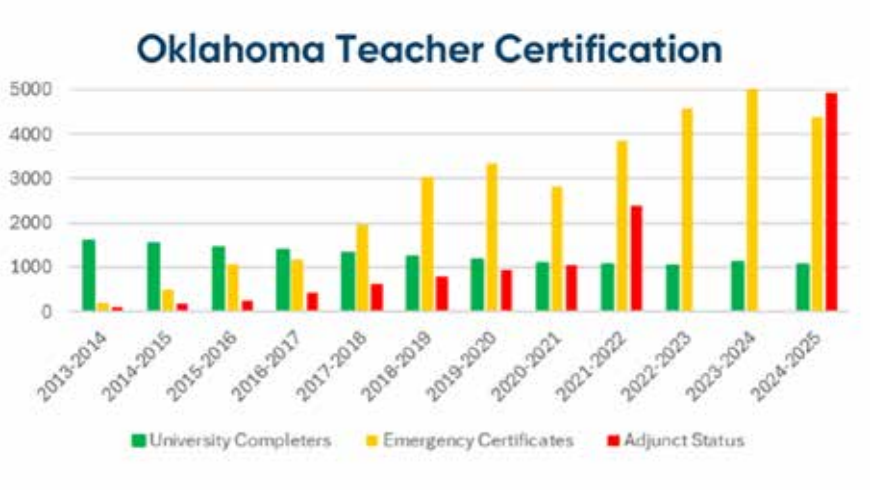
Many stakeholders have been involved in this process, but the key partnership was between the Chamber staff, the Committee and Norman Public Schools staff. While this project is not completed yet, optimism for its success remains very high. The Committee believes this will lead to increased participation so each school can benefit from the vast resources in the Norman business community.

For more information, visit the Norman Chamber of Commerce at https://www.normanchamber.com/partners-in-education-program/ .

Pathways, Partnerships, and Policy – Growing the educator workforce to improve education in Oklahoma

Kendra Horn, President & CEO, Oklahoma City Public Schools Foundation

One of the most significant opportunities and simultaneously one of the biggest challenges facing PreK-12 education in Oklahoma today is our educator workforce. To improve outcomes and strengthen education, we must recruit, train, and retain an experienced, qualified, prepared educator workforce. Without this we will continue to struggle and pay the price.



You may wonder, why does this matter? What difference does an education degree make? Why do teachers need specific training on the method and practice of teaching or the science, theory, and strategies that help kids learn?

To set the stage – our qualified, trained educator workforce is in crisis. Over the past decade plus, our state has been hemorrhaging certified teachers. Between 2012 – 2018 alone Oklahoma lost 30,000 certified teachers. The estimated price tag of replacing these educators is between $330 and $720 million dollars. This problem is further compounded because many of the positions vacated by teachers with standard certification have been filled with emergency certified teachers and more recently adjunct teachers. Today, Oklahoma issues more emergency teacher certifications than any other state in the nation.

Traditional teacher certifications require specific coursework, student teaching, and state examinations, emergency certificates don't. Additionally, while emergency certified teachers are required to have a college degree, adjunct teachers don't have to have a degree or experience. The adjunct exception was intended to be used for people with industry specific experience and skills in a dedicated area, such as construction, not for full-time classroom teachers charged with building the basics for our earliest learners. Beyond the financial ramifications of filling this gap of experienced educators are the losses in student achievement and proficiency, teacher morale, and overall quality of education. This goes on to have long term and significant impacts in our economy, job market, and much more. Simply put, we are placing people in classrooms who have no training or experience in the fundamentals of how to teach. This costs school districts, our state, and our children dearly.

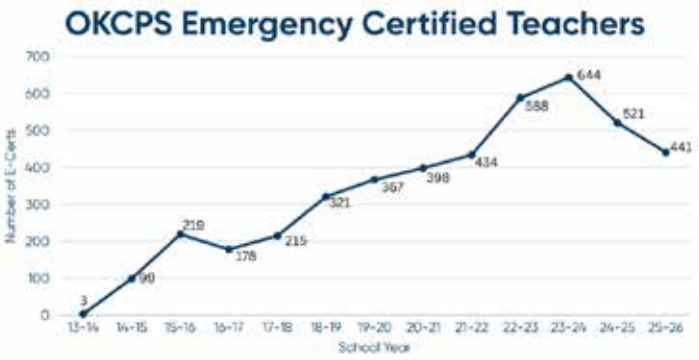
As you can see in the chart at the top of this page, emergency and adjunct teacher certifications skyrocketed between 2013 and 2024. At the same time, Oklahoma's ranking in reading and math dropped from 37th to 48th between 2015 and 2024. Additionally, comprehensively trained and traditionally certified teachers are more likely to stay in the classroom with an 80% retention rate after 5 years. In contrast, after 3 years only 19% of emergency certified teachers are still in the classroom. (Teacher education: Higher education supports and workforce retention (OK House Interim Study 025-068).

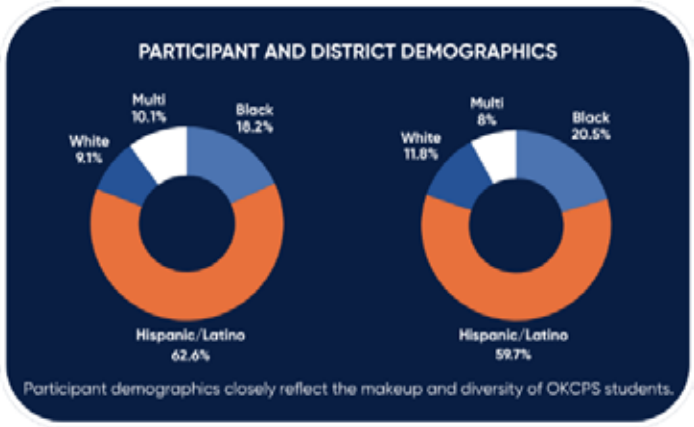
We can and should do better. But we cannot and should not expect a silver bullet or magic wand that will solve this problem overnight. The idea of one-time bonuses and incentives are nothing more than a band-aid on a bullet wound. We need real, substantive, long-term solutions to change our trajectory. The key elements of this are – pathways, partnerships, and policy that work in concert with a long-term commitment.

The most significant contributing factors to the educator workforce crisis include, conditions surrounding education; devaluation of the profession; lack of upward trajectory in teacher pay; limited pathways for individuals and districts to access resources to help close gaps; and lack of clear opportunities for businesses and community partners to be a part of the solution.

The OKCPS Foundation Teacher Pipeline Program (TPP) serves as a case study in what it looks like to strengthen the educator workforce through capacity building from within a community by partnerships between aligned organizations, school districts, higher education partners, and policy makers.

As one of the two largest districts in Oklahoma, Oklahoma City Public Schools (OKCPS) was the proverbial canary in a coal mine with the educator workforce crisis. Between 2013 and 2015 the number of emergency certified teachers in OKCPS spiked from 3 to 219, three years before the statewide numbers took off, as illustrated by the chart at the top of the next page.





A majority-minority district, OKCPS serves more than 32,000 students – (59%) Hispanic, (45%) English-language learners, with 90% living under the poverty line. Students in this district are overcoming significant obstacles, and it is especially important that teachers are qualified, experienced, and connected to the community they serve.

Facing a shortage of qualified educators and rising needs, we worked with the district, the University of Central Oklahoma (UCO) College of Education, and other higher education partners to build a program that would allow us to grow teachers from within the district. In 2016 we formed the OKCPS Foundation Teacher Pipeline Program (TPP). This program provides a debt-free pathway for OKCPS paraprofessionals to earn their degree and become certified teachers for OKCPS. Graduates enter the classroom as comprehensively trained and fully certified educators.

The OKCPS Foundation pays all tuition, books, and fees, and provides wrap-around support, allowing participants to complete their degree while remaining employed as OKCPS paraprofessionals. Participants commit to teaching in OKCPS for at least three years after graduation. By working closely with OKCPS and higher education partners at UCO, OCCC, and OSU-OKC, we ensure TPP graduates are highly trained and qualified.

Today, it is the largest and most successful grow your own educator program in Oklahoma with 48 graduates as of May 2026, a 90% retention rate post-graduation, and 87 participants still working towards their degrees. And by recruiting from within existing paraprofessionals, TPP graduates are not only well-prepared but also reflect the students they serve.

Though programs like TPP are not a panacea, they can serve as a guide that will help lead to long-term, substantive change in our educator workforce. Key lessons include:

- First, to be successful, roles and responsibilities among partners must be clearly defined, with a designated lead organization to coordinate efforts.
- Second, relationships are key. Partnerships must go beyond agreements that only exist on paper.
- Third, adaptation is essential. Success is built on understanding and responding to the specific needs of the community. Consistent evaluation, refinement, and improvement will serve everyone involved.
- Fourth, commit and invest long-term. From core partners to external champions, everyone has to understand that instant results are an unattainable myth.
- Finally, policy change must come alongside this type of pathway. Investments such as Senate bill 235 that provides matching funds for Grow-Your-Own educator programs like TPP incentivize organizations and districts to make a long-term commitment to address the crisis of qualified educators across our state.

The bottom line is this – we can't move the needle in education without realistic pathways to place more quality, trained, educators in the classrooms.

ELEMENTS	OKCPS FDN. TEACHER PIPELINE	GYO	RESIDENCY	APPRENTICESHIP
Full tuition, books, fees	●	◗	◗	◗
Paid student teaching	●	◗	◗	◗
Guaranteed job placement	●	◗	◗	◗
Standard licensure	●	◗	●	●
Post-graduate support	●	◗	◗	◗
Community-based recruitment	●	●	◗	◗
Individualized support	●	●	◗	◗
Multiple pathways	●	●	◗	◗
Paid work-based learning	●	◗	◗	●
Aligned coursework	●	◗	●	●
Minimum number of hours/years of work-based learning	●	○	●	●
Cohorts	●	◗	●	◗
Culminates in a degree	●	◗	●	◗
Progressive wages*	○	○	○	●

*The OKCPS Fdn. Teacher Pipeline provides full release of paraprofessional responsibilities while student teaching with continued paraprofessional pay.

● ALWAYS PRESENT ◗ SOMETIMES PRESENT ○ NOT PRESENT

Strong Schools Require Strong Communities: Reimagining the Classroom Through Partnership

Moises Echeverria, Foundation for Tulsa Schools

Every generation is asked to prepare their young people for a future that is impossible to predict. Today, that challenge is greater than ever. Our students are growing up in a world defined by rapid technological change, shifting workforce demands, increasing mental health needs, and widening disparities in opportunity. Despite these challenges, one truth remains constant: the classroom is where opportunity begins.

The Foundation for Tulsa Schools works diligently alongside educators, school leaders, business partners, philanthropists, and community organizations with the common goal of strengthening our community through the support of our public school district. We believe that every student will succeed with the right support, and every educator deserves to be fully equipped to deliver excellence. Through our work, I have learned that no single program, policy, or organization can transform educational outcomes alone. Lasting improvement requires strong schools supported by strong communities.

While Oklahoma continues to face significant challenges in early childhood and PreK–12 education, we also have tremendous opportunities to rethink how we support our classrooms. By moving beyond isolated solutions and instead working to strengthen the ecosystem surrounding our schools, we can create learning environments where every student can thrive.

Today's Classroom Faces Challenges Beyond Academics

Teachers are expected to do far more today than teach reading, writing, mathematics, and science. Often, they are mentors, counselors, social workers, technology facilitators, crisis managers, and relationship builders. Every day they respond to students whose needs extend well beyond the curriculum.

Many children arrive at school carrying burdens that affect their ability to learn. Food insecurity, housing instability, trauma, chronic absenteeism, mental health concerns, and family economic pressures all influence classroom success. These realities cannot be ignored simply because they exist outside school walls.

At the same time, educators themselves face increasing pressures. Teacher shortages, burnout, administrative demands, and growing expectations have created one of the most challenging professional environments in decades. Recruiting talented educators is difficult; retaining experienced educators has become a challenge.

These realities are not unique to Oklahoma, but they are especially significant in communities where schools serve as one of the few stable institutions available to children and families.

Public Education Is a Shared Community Responsibility

Too often, conversations about improving education focus almost exclusively on what schools could do differently. While continuous improvement within schools is essential, this perspective overlooks a fundamental reality: student success is influenced by an entire community.

Research consistently demonstrates that learning is shaped by factors both inside and outside the classroom. Families, businesses, nonprofit organizations, healthcare providers, higher education institutions, faith communities, and civic leaders all contribute to creating the conditions that allow students to succeed.

Public schools cannot solve every societal challenge. Nor should they be expected to.

Instead, communities must ask a different question: How can each sector contribute its unique strengths to support students and educators?

This shift in perspective changes education from being solely the responsibility of school districts into a shared civic responsibility.

In Tulsa, there are promising examples of this approach already underway.

Community organizations offer after-school programming and family services. Through our Expanded Learning Network investment, we ensure that each school in our most underserved communities has an accountable point of contact to maximize the afterschool programs available in our city. Through this investment, 77% of our elementary school students participates in afterschool and daytime programs offered by community organizations.

Through our arts equity program and with the support of 14 art partners, over 25,000 K-8th students experienced a high quality, fine arts experience last year.

Our Foundation also invests in innovative classroom projects. Last year we supported 25 projects in 19 schools, reaching over 3,890 students with resources to help cement the lessons their teachers taught them.

These partnerships matter because they allow educators to focus more fully on teaching while ensuring students receive the additional supports they need.

Investing in Teachers Is Investing in Students

No school improvement strategy will succeed without a sustained investment in educators.

Teachers remain the single most important school-based factor influencing student achievement. They deserve competitive compensation, meaningful professional learning, effective instructional resources, and supportive working conditions.

However, supporting teachers extends beyond salary alone. Educators need manageable workloads, access to instructional coaches, mental health resources, classroom supplies, and opportunities for professional collaboration. They also need communities that recognize the value of their work and celebrate their contributions.

To respond to the national teacher vacancy crisis and the high number of emergency certified teachers in Oklahoma, Tulsa Public Schools launched Tulsa Teacher Corps, a six-week intensive summer training for novice teachers with two years of wrap around support. Our foundation partnered to provide compensation to the novice teachers for their summer training. Corps members go on to become highly effective teachers. To date, our foundation has supported over 480 Corps members. 127 of them have obtained their standard teaching certification and 288 of them are on track to complete their certification this year. In a time when teacher turnover is high, our Corps members have an 89% third rear retention rate.

When teachers feel supported, students benefit directly through stronger instruction, greater continuity, and healthier classroom environments.

Preparing Students for an Uncertain Future

The skills students need are evolving rapidly.

Strong literacy and numeracy remain foundational, but employers increasingly seek graduates who can think critically, solve complex problems, collaborate effectively, communicate across differences, and adapt to changing circumstances.
Preparing students for this future requires classrooms that encourage curiosity, creativity, and authentic learning experiences.

Students benefit when classroom instruction connects to real-world experiences through project-based learning, career exploration, internships, arts education, service learning, and partnerships with local industries. These experiences help students understand the relevance of what they are learning while developing the durable skills that will serve them throughout their lives.

Through Tulsa Public Schools' new Career Academies, businesses are locking arms with our high schools to offer meaningful career exploration activities, mentorships and internships.

The goal is not simply preparing students for their first job but equipping them for lifelong learning in a constantly changing economy.

One Policy Recommendation: Make Early Literacy Oklahoma's Highest Educational Priority

If I could advance one policy recommendation for Oklahoma, it would be to make comprehensive early literacy support the state's highest educational priority.

This commitment should include expanding access to high-quality early childhood education; ensuring every elementary classroom is equipped with evidence-based literacy instruction aligned with the science of reading; providing sustained professional learning and instructional coaching for educators; implementing universal early literacy screening and timely interventions; and strengthening family engagement so reading becomes part of everyday life at home as well as at school.

Success will require more than increased funding. It will require intentional coordination among state leaders, school districts, higher education institutions, community organizations, libraries, businesses, and philanthropic organizations.
The return on this investment would be profound. Students who become proficient readers by the end of third grade are more likely to succeed academically, graduate from high school, pursue postsecondary education or workforce credentials, and contribute meaningfully to their communities. Investments made during the earliest years reduce the need for more intensive interventions later while opening doors to lifelong opportunity.

There is no education policy with greater potential to change the trajectory of Oklahoma's future than ensuring every child is an avid reader.

Looking Ahead

Our future will be determined by the opportunities we create for our students.

Our classrooms are full of future entrepreneurs, engineers, artists, teachers, healthcare professionals, public servants, and community leaders. Our responsibility is to ensure they have the support they need to discover their potential.

This work cannot rest solely on educators. It belongs to all of us.

When we invest in public education, not only through funding, but through partnership, volunteerism, advocacy, and shared responsibility, we create schools that are resilient, more innovative, and better equipped to prepare students for the future, and we strengthen our communities.

The opportunity before us is not merely to solve today's challenges, but to build a system where every child, regardless of background or circumstance, has the opportunity to succeed. That vision is both ambitious and achievable, if we commit to pursuing it together.

Elevating Public Education in Oklahoma

Hayley Riggs McGhee, Oklahoma Foundation for Excellence

For 40 years, the Oklahoma Foundation for Excellence has elevated public education in Oklahoma.

In 1985, while serving Oklahoma as a U.S. senator, David L. Boren brought together a group of Oklahoma business and community leaders with the goal of improving public education in the state.

This led to the establishment of OFE, a statewide nonprofit that recognizes and encourages academic excellence in Oklahoma's public schools.

OFE champions public education through esteemed honors, support for public school foundations, grants for K-12 mentoring organizations, and partnerships that provide exceptional professional development to Oklahoma educators.

Academic Awards

Through its Academic Awards, OFE presents $181,000 annually to outstanding public school educators, students and foundations.

Three honors make up this program:

- Medal for Excellence, awarded to five educators for their passion and innovation, commitment to professional development, and extraordinary impact on student learning
- Academic All-State, given to 100 high school seniors for their academic achievement, leadership and community service
- Outstanding Program Awards for School Foundations, which recognize three public school foundations for innovative programs they sponsor or administer

Each May, OFE honors the recipients at its Academic Awards Celebration, bringing together hundreds of public education champions for an unforgettable evening that showcases the powerful impact of Oklahoma's public schools.

Oklahoma School Foundations Network

OFE has helped Oklahoma build one of the state's largest networks of public school foundations, with more than 200 established. These citizen-led nonprofits raise millions to support academic excellence and galvanize community support for public schools.



Members of the 2026 Academic All-State Class sing "Oklahoma!" to conclude the Academic Awards Celebration on May 2 at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City. Each year, the Oklahoma Foundation for Excellence names 100 public school seniors as Academic All-State honorees. Photo by AJ Stegall Photography

OFE supports new and established public school foundations through its Oklahoma School Foundations Network, which provides free training, resources, strategic planning and networking opportunities.

Mentoring Grants

OFE offers grants to new and existing mentoring programs focused on Oklahoma students in grades K-12. Organizations can use the funds to support strategic needs, including programming, training, materials, start-up costs and other expenses. To qualify, an organization must be a 501(c)(3) nonprofit or be working with a public school district or other qualified 501(c)(3) umbrella organization.

In 2026, OFE awarded $24,000 to 13 mentoring programs across Oklahoma.

Teacher Professional Development Partnerships

Partnerships with two national organizations allow OFE to provide exceptional professional development opportunities to teachers.

These programs reenergize educators, who return to their classrooms with not just new resources but also new enthusiasm.

OFE works with Fund for Teachers to provide educators

with professional development experiences that they design themselves. Since 2006, Fund for Teachers has provided more than $3.3 million in fellowships to 987 Oklahoma educators.

The foundation partners with the Bob and Marion Wilson Teacher Institute of Colonial Williamsburg to send educators to the renowned institute in Williamsburg, Virginia. Each summer, 30-plus fifth and eighth grade teachers spend six days immersing themselves in early American history. They explore restored colonial-era buildings and interact with character interpreters. The program has served 1,262 Oklahoma teachers since 1993.

Oklahoma Public Schools Foundation

In 2026, OFE partnered with the Oklahoma State School Boards Association to launch the Oklahoma Public Schools Foundation, a new nonprofit that is broadening OFE's impact on public education.

The Oklahoma Public Schools Foundation champions investment in public schools by facilitates and raises awareness of the tax credits created by Oklahoma's Equal Opportunity Education Act. The act incentivizes direct investment in public schools by allowing donors to give to designated educational improvement projects at the district of their choice and then reduce their state tax bill through a credit. OKPSF operates as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit and a public school foundation, partnering with districts and collaborating with local education foundations to maximize support for public schools.

> ***"Widespread public access to knowledge, like public education, is one of the pillars of our democracy, a guarantee that we can maintain a well-informed citizenry.***
>
> *Scott Turow*

Oklahoma private school tax credit program sees growth. Who benefits?

Nuria Martinez-Keel, Oklahoma Voice, June 23, 2026

A growing Oklahoma tax credit program will spend at least $255 million in the coming year to support private school students, including an increasing number of children coming from higher-income homes.

The Parental Choice Tax Credit Program, which uses state funds to offset families' cost of private schooling, so far has had a slight decline in participation from lower-income "priority" recipients in the 2026-27 school year, despite the overall number of applicants increasing, a monthly Oklahoma Tax Commission report shows.

The program has seen growth, though, in students experiencing homelessness or who attend private schools primarily serving "financially disadvantaged" families, the report indicates.

The Tax Commission's monthly report is dated June 8, a week before the final application deadline of June 15 for the 2026-27 school year. Its next report with updated numbers will come out in July, a commission spokesperson said.

With a budget raised to $275 million for the 2027 fiscal year, the program issues a check of $5,000 to $7,500 to a child's private school based on the student's household income.

The report shows 21,359 "priority" students, whose households earn $150,000 or less per year, were approved to receive tax credits in 2026-27. These families, who are placed first in line for approval, will receive nearly $152 million, or about 59%, of the $255 million total when factoring in homeless and financially disadvantaged students, according to an Oklahoma Voice analysis.

That's a tick lower than in 2025-26, when 22,152 priority students collectively received $153.36 million. The priority group was awarded just under 62% of the total $250 million distributed that year.

Meanwhile, households earning more than $150,000 are taking up an increasing share of the program's funds. In 2025-26, they received $97 million in tax credits. In the coming school year, they'll represent nearly $104.2 million, or 40.8%, of the total distributed, compared to 38.8% the year before.

Legislative Democrats, who have long opposed the parental choice program, contended this trend is a sign the tax credits are primarily a boon for the wealthy rather than a vehicle for poorer households to access their school of choice.

A series of statements from Oklahoma Senate Democrats also scrutinized the fact that only a small fraction of receiving students — 3,112 out of 39,637 — had been enrolled in a public school the semester prior to the 2026-27 academic year. This number doesn't account for how many students have left public schools since the program's creation in 2023.



Rep. Chad Caldwell, R-Enid, speaks in the House chamber of the state Capitol in Oklahoma City on April 28. (Photo by Nuria Martinez-Keel/ Oklahoma Voice)

"The latest data from the Oklahoma Tax Commission confirms what many Oklahomans already suspected: Oklahoma's tax credit voucher scheme is overwhelmingly benefiting families who were already paying for private school, while middle- and lower-income families are being left behind," Sen. Mark Mann, D-Oklahoma City, said in a statement.

Factoring in the final week of applicants could create a different picture, but the current numbers alone show the program is a "resounding success," said Rep. Chad Caldwell, R-Enid. Caldwell has been an advocate for the program and filed legislation to increase its budget limit.

Complaints about wealthier families accessing the tax credit are "disingenuous," he said. If those families sent their children to public schools, Caldwell said, the taxpayer cost to educate those students would be far greater than the value of a tax credit.

"Every one of these individuals in these families are taxpayers," he said. "This is simply allowing them to use those

tax dollars to send their child to the school and the school system that they feel best fits their kids."

Applications for children experiencing more extreme levels of poverty have ticked up. That's another positive sign, Caldwell said, that Oklahomans of all walks of life are accessing the program.

The number of financially disadvantaged or homeless students receiving the tax credit has increased from 345 in the 2025-26 school year to 418 in 2026-27, the Tax Commission reported.

These recipients must attend a private school that specifically serves families experiencing homelessness or 90% of whose enrollment is made up of "financially disadvantaged" students from households earning no more than 250% of the federal poverty level, according to Tax Commission rules.

The Tax Commission reported 32 students experiencing homelessness were approved for the program in both 2025-26 and 2026-27. Each attends Positive Tomorrows, an Oklahoma City private school supporting families who lack stable income and housing, said the school's president and CEO, Margaret Creighton.

Nine more students were approved for tax credits in the week between the report's release and the final application deadline of June 15, Creighton said.

That would bring the total number to 41 recipients experiencing homelessness in the coming school year.

The cost to educate a child at Positive Tomorrows is about $22,000, but the school doesn't charge tuition, she said. Its top sources of funding are grants and contributions, the school's financial records show.

Creighton said the tax credit program provides additional revenue that could help Positive Tomorrows expand.

"Essentially every child is on scholarship here," Creighton said. "So, whether that's a scholarship from the community through a donor or through a United Way campaign or through a program like the Parental Choice Tax Credit, all of those dollars coming together for the betterment of our community allows us to serve more kids."

Notes

This is a resource document for you to use.
Take notes, highlight, use as a text book.

50 State K-12 Education Funding Formula

Kansas Legislative Research Department, February 20, 2025

This memorandum compares the kindergarten through 12th grade (K-12) funding system in all 50 states as of March 2024. This memorandum also defines the most common funding mechanisms used by states to give state aid in different programs and demographics.

Primary Funding Model

The Primary Funding Model is determined by either students or resources in most states. A majority of states use a student-based model, including Kansas. In a student-based model, districts receive a base amount of funding per student, with additional money or weights added to provide additional services and support to students with unique needs. The other 34 states and the District of Columbia (D.C.) that use this model are: Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, D.C., Florida, Hawaii, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Utah.

Other states use resources to determine funding. In a resource-based model, districts receive funding sufficient to pay for minimum required resources such as staffing, services, or programs. There are nine states that use this model, including: Alabama, Delaware, Idaho, North Carolina, South Dakota, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, and Wyoming.

There are four states that use a hybrid model of both students and resources to determine funding. These states include Georgia, Illinois, Maine, and Massachusetts.

Two states, Vermont and Wisconsin, use a separate funding model from those listed. Vermont uses a model called the Education Fund, which couples the state's education finance system with local property tax administration. Spending for school districts is approved at the local level by school boards and passed by voters. Education is then funded by property tax rates and education yields annually, which is set by the Legislature. Wisconsin uses the Equalization Aid Formula to determine funding. This formula is known as a "cost-sharing formula", meaning both the state and local districts contribute to fund the total cost determined by aid from three tiers of calculations.

Base Amount

The base amount is the minimum guaranteed dollar amount per student each state may allocate to every school district. The base amount may or may not have an inflationary requirement and inflationary measure. There are 32 states plus D.C. that had a base amount as of the 2023-2024 school year, including Kansas. These states plus D.C. were Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, D.C., Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Utah.

Additionally, there are 18 states that do not use a base amount for their K-12 funding: Alabama, Delaware, Idaho, Illinois, Maine, Massachusetts, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.

Weightings and Funding Mechanisms

There are a number of ways that states allocate funds to school districts for different student populations. These methods are known as weightings or funding mechanisms and are usually enacted through state code or statute. These items can also be found in the state's educational agency bylaws or a specific state aid handbook. For each student population, a state may choose to utilize one of the defined funding mechanisms below:

- **Single weight:** A single percentage is multiplied by the base amount to provide supplemental services for students and districts;
- **Multiple weights:** Each weighting's percentage is multiplied by the base amount to differentiate the student need or programming by funding;
- **Categorical:** Allocation of funds to school districts through funding streams externals to the primary funding model;
- **Census-based:** Funding is based on attendance or enrollment counts for the overall student body, rather than actual district demographics;
- **High-cost services funding:** Reimbursement of school districts for a particularly high-cost service;
- **Reimbursement:** Individual school districts submit receipts of eligible expenditures to the state, and the state reimburses for all or a portion of expenditures;
- **Resource allocation:** State-allocated funds pay for specified staffing positions or programming; and
- **Hybrid:** Using a combination of the above funding mechanisms.

Special Education Amount

There are many ways that states currently determine special education state aid. These range from reimbursements of special education program spending for the school year, to

census-based, and hybrid or multiple weight measurements.

Reimbursement Method

In Kansas, the formula used is based on a reimbursement method determined by expenditures, costs, and the statutory aid amount. Three other states use a reimbursement funding mechanism similar to Kansas: Michigan, Nebraska, and Wyoming.

Hybrid Mechanism

The most frequently used method for special education funding is a hybrid mechanism. This can include awards, census, specially allocated funds, and weights. There are 27 states that use the hybrid special education funding mechanism: Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Montana, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Dakota, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin.

Multiple Weightings System

Additionally, there are nine states plus D.C. that use a multiple weightings system. The weights that each state uses differ, but range from enrollment, Individualized Education Plan (IEP) level, and type of disability. The nine states including D.C. that use the multiple weightings funding mechanism are: D.C., Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Nevada, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Texas.

Single Weightings System

Four states use a single weightings special education funding mechanism. These single weights range from being set by IEP rates, district performances, and each qualifying student. The four states that utilize single weights are:

- **Louisiana:** Students with disabilities who have an IEP;
- **Maryland:** For fiscal year 2025, the special education per pupil amount will be
- weighted at 99 percent;
- **Missouri:** Special education students with an IEP rate of at least 13.11 percent
- (2023-24); and
- **South Carolina:** Students with disabilities who have an IEP.

High-Cost Services

Two states use a high-cost services funding model. Connecticut utilizes this method with an appropriated amount calculated as 4.5 times the school district's current expenditures per pupil. Rhode Island is the other state to use this funding method, by which it appropriates at 4.0 times the core foundation amount for each school district.

Resource Allocation

Two states use resource allocation funding, Delaware and Mississippi. Delaware utilizes a student-to-unit ratio to decide the amount of resources needed in special education. Studentto-unit ratios look at the intensity of needs and services compared to each student.

Mississippi uses a three-tier system to determine resource allocation funding. Tier one includes language and speech impairments, developmental delays, and specific learning disabilities, which receive 60.0 percent of funding. Tier two includes autism, emotional disabilities, hearing impairments, intellectual disabilities, other health impairments, or orthopedic impairments. This second tier receives 125.0 percent of funding. Tier three includes students who are deaf-blind, have multiple disabilities, have traumatic brain injuries, or are visually impaired. This tier receives 170.0 percent of funding.

Categorical Funding Mechanism

Both North Carolina and West Virginia use a categorical funding mechanism for special education funding.

English Learner Amount

Similarly to special education funding, when determining aid for English Language Learner (ELL) programming, the same mechanisms are used. There are two states that do not have funding for ELL, Mississippi and Montana.

Single Weightings System

In Kansas, a single weight system is used. There are 18 other states that also use a single weight funding mechanism for ELL: Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, and Utah.

Multiple Weighting Systems

16 states use a multiple weights funding mechanism for ELL aid. Many states use proficiency, grade level, and number of ELL students in the district as weightings. The 15 states plus D.C. that use this funding method are: Alabama, California, D.C., Hawaii, Indiana, Iowa, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, North Dakota, Ohio, Tennessee, and Texas.

Hybrid Funding System

Five states use a hybrid funding system to combine other funding models. These states include:

- Alaska: Census-based and single weight;
- Arizona: Census-based and single weight;
- Colorado: Single weight and categorical funding;
- Connecticut: Single weight and categorical funding; and
- Vermont: Single weight and categorical funding.

Resource Allocation

Five states use a resource allocation model for ELL state aid. States determine this aid based on counts of ELL

students, but the specific determinants for the counts and programming of such is different for each state. The five states that utilize the resource allocation model are:

- Illinois: Tier funding based on counts of ELL students;
- North Carolina: If school districts have at least 20 students or 2.5 percent of total average daily membership with limited English language proficiency;
- Virginia: The state funds 20 full-time equivalent instructional positions for each 1,000 students identified as having limited English language proficiency;
- Washington: Funding is based on number of students in transitional bilingual instruction program; and
- Wyoming: ELL students are each counted as 1.0 full-time equivalent for the AtRisk count in the formula.

Categorical Funding Mechanism
State aid for ELL also comes from categorical funding mechanisms. Delaware, Idaho, and West Virginia all use this method of funding for programming.

Reimbursement Funding Model
Additionally, one state, Wisconsin, uses a reimbursement funding model for ELL aid.

Low-Income Amount
Funding for low-income students uses the same funding mechanisms previously discussed. Seven states do not have funding for this student population. These states are: Alaska, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, South Dakota, West Virginia, and Wisconsin.

Multiple Weightings System
Kansas uses a multiple weights funding mechanism for low-income students and identifies students for this aid based on eligibility for free and reduced lunches. The weights used are a high-density weight based on the qualifying students in the district and an additional weight of 48.4 percent. Besides Kansas, there are 13 other states plus D.C. that use a multiple weights funding mechanism. These states are: Arkansas, Colorado, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Texas.

Single Weightings System
There are 17 states that use a single weight funding system for their low-income students: Arizona, Hawaii, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Mississippi, Missouri, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Utah, and Vermont.

Hybrid Funding System
State aid for five states come from a hybrid funding mechanism for low-income students. The five states that use this funding model are:

- **California:** Multiple weights and categorical;
- **Iowa:** Census-based and single weight;
- **Maryland:** Single weight and categorical;
- **New Hampshire:** Single weight and multiple weights; and
- **Virginia:** Resource allocation and multiple weights.

Resource Allocation
There are four states that use a resource allocation model to fund low-income student programming. Funds are allocated based on the number of students from low-income students in each school district, the number of instruction hours needed per week to provide learning assistance, or students being counted as 1.0 full-time equivalents. The four states that use resource allocation are: Illinois, North Carolina, Washington, and Wyoming.

Categorical Funding Mechanism
States have also appropriated funds to be used through a categorical funding mechanism. The amount allocated is different for each state, but three total states use this method—Alabama, Delaware, and Montana.

Gifted and Talented Amount
Many states also allocate money to fund programming for gifted and talented services in school districts. There are 13 states plus D.C. that do not currently fund these programs. These states include: California, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Missouri, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Tennessee, and Vermont.

The other 37 states use one of the funding mechanisms to allocate a dollar amount for gifted and talented programming.

Reimbursement Funding Mechanism
Kansas uses a reimbursement funding mechanism determined by a formula associated with the special education state aid. There are two other states, Maine and North Dakota, that use a reimbursement funding system to fund gifted and talented programming.

Categorical Funding Mechanism
There are 12 states that use a categorical funding mechanism to fund their gifted and talented services. These states are: Alabama, Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, Montana, Nebraska, Oregon, Utah, and Wisconsin.

Single Weightings System
Single weightings are also used as a mechanism for gifted and talented funding. There are ten states that utilize this method with a range of additional weights added to their base amounts. These ten states include: Arizona, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, Maryland, Minnesota, Nevada, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Texas.

Resource Allocation
There are six states that use a resource allocation model to fund programming for gifted and talented resources. The six states that use this mechanism include:

- **Delaware:** One resource unit per 250 pupils;
- **Mississippi:** Adequate education program salary schedule based on the type of certificate and number of years' teaching experience held by each approved gifted education teacher plus the employer' s rate for Social Security and State Retirement;
- **Ohio:** Provides additional funding for gifted students to cover costs associated with full-time equivalent gifted coordinators and gifted intervention specialists;
- **Virginia:** Funds one full-time equivalent instructional position per 1,000 students;
- **West Virginia:** Provides an allowance for students enrolled in advanced placement, dual credit, and international baccalaureate courses; and
- **Wyoming:** Gifted and talented students are counted in the prototype elements in the School Foundation Program.

Hybrid Funding Mechanism
Additionally, five states use a hybrid funding mechanism for gifted and talented programming:

- **Alaska:** Single weight and census-based;
- **Hawaii:** Single weight and census-based;
- **Idaho:** Resource allocation and census-based;
- **Iowa:** Single weight and census-based; and
- **Washington:** Resource allocation and census-based.

Census-Based Funding
North Carolina is the lone state that uses census-based funding for gifted and talented services. North Carolina provides additional supplemental funds per pupil assuming that 4.0 percent of the daily average is academically or intellectually gifted.

Small Size or Isolated Amount
Based on size, schools may also receive funding, also known as small size or isolated amount. However, there are 14 states plus D.C. that do not allocate funds to districts and schools for this criteria: Alabama, Connecticut, Delaware, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Ohio, Rhode Island, and South Carolina.

The other 36 states have some kind of small size or isolated funding mechanism in place for school districts.

Multiple Weightings System
Kansas uses a multiple weights system based on the number of students under 100 or between 100 and 1,622 students. There are 20 other states that use a multiple weights system to determine funding for small size or isolated schools. These states include: Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, and Vermont.

Categorical Funding Mechanism
Another six states use the categorical funding mechanism for small size or isolated schools. The states that have appropriated aid using this method are: Georgia, Massachusetts, Missouri, North Carolina, Virginia, and Wisconsin.

Resource Allocation
There are five states that use resource allocation to fund small size or isolated school districts. These states are:

- **Idaho:** Determined by state board;
- **Maine:** Adjustments made to student-to-staff ratios and per-pupil amount as established by commissioner;
- **Washington:** Identified districts receive formula adjustments to ensure provision of minimum number of certified staffing units;
- **West Virginia:** Basic foundation allowance differentiates education positions based on density of the district; and
- **Wyoming:** Provides for minimum amount of full-time equivalent teachers based on average daily membership for schools with 49 or fewer students.

Single Weightings System
A total of three states use a single weight system for funding of small size or isolated schools: Hawaii, Nebraska, and Pennsylvania. Hawaii adds an additional weight of 0.8 percent for each qualifying neighbor islands student. Nebraska also uses single weight to fund small size or isolated schools. For districts with a student enrollment of 900 or fewer, funding equals the average operating expenditures for a comparison group of 10 schools with similar student populations, excluding the two districts with the highest and lowest operating expenditures within the comparison group. The third state to use this mechanism is Pennsylvania, which adds an additional weight of 30.0 percent.

Hybrid Funding Mechanism
South Dakota is the only state that uses a hybrid system for small size or isolated schools. It uses both resource allocation and categorical funding to add additional funds.

Neodesha Promise: Bridging the Gap

Rebekah Peitz, Neodesha Promise

Background:

Neodesha, Kansas is a small rural community with a population of less than 2,500 located in Wilson County, one of the poorest counties in Kansas. With a 16.3% poverty rate, above the state average of 12%. The population in Neodesha, similar to many small midwest communities, has declined substantially over the years. Losing one third of households in the last thirty years.

A Neodesha alumni read about the Promise Program started in Kalamazoo Michigan in 2005. What intrigued him was not only the impact the program had on local students but also the impact on the school system and the local community. The Promise Scholarship program launched in Kalamazoo, Michigan led to over 300 communities around the United States implementing similar programs. After further research on other Promise communities around the U.S. he decided to create a promise program for his hometown. He spent several years designing the Neodesha Promise Program and he was amazed by the willingness of other promise programs to provide advice and counsel to his design efforts. Promise program administrators bent over backwards to be of assistance. It's a wonderfully supportive community.

The Neodesha promise program was launched in 2019. With the fi nancial hardships that over half of the Neodesha district families faced, pursuing a post secondary opportunity was a significant affordability challenge. The Promise program created an essential bridge making a post secondary choice financially feasible for more students. Since its launch in 2019, the percentage of Neodesha High School graduates electing to go on to a post secondary program has increased, in part due to the financial assistance, but more significantly due to the unique partnership between the Promise Program and the Neodesha School district.

A unique aspect of the Neodesha Promise Program is the partnership that has been established with the Neodesha school district. When the Promise was launched, a dual role for a promise program administrator and college academic coach within the district was put in place. The promise program administrator is "housed" in Neodesha High School and works closely with the district's College and Career Advisor/CTE Coordinator. This partnership gives our Promise program the ability to start working with our students early to create a mentoring relationship. An essential component of our program is the high level intrusive academic advising model the partnership with our school district has allowed us to create. The college academic coach and college and career advisor work hand in hand to provide wrap-around advising services for students from 9th grade through their post secondary education. Together they host events such as Apply Kansas (college application completion), FAFSA completion, Scholarship workshops, arranging college visits and much more. These positions allow us to provide hands-on support for our students to navigate the complicated process that can be post secondary education. A large portion of our district are first generation students which creates a unique challenge for not only students, but their families as well. Our goal is to make post secondary not only financially accessible, but also to create a familiarity with the post secondary process for students and parents. These two positions work closely to establish the college going culture within our district.

Creating the College Going Culture is a district wide mission. All students K-12 are educated on college and career opportunities. Each year we host a college and career week that brings awareness to our students on local employment opportunities and the education needed to work in those careers. With the frequent follow up with our college students, we had the unique opportunity to create a program we call "Promise Pals". This program gives our elementary students the ability to connect with our college students. It gives our students the ability to learn more about the institutions our scholarship recipients are attending, learn about their major, and their career goals. This helps to make the idea of attending college and setting those goals more attainable.

With the established familiarity of the post secondary world, our next goal is how to provide our students with the necessary resources to be successful in their post secondary education. Intentional communication is made with our students with bi-weekly check- ins throughout their education. Proactive intervention has been created with the enforcement of midterm grade checks each semester. Early intervention allows us to help students to identify the resources they need to be successful early in their education. The key to all of this is establishing relationships with our students early. The intrusive advising of our program is much more effective with frequent communication between the administrator/academic coach and the student.

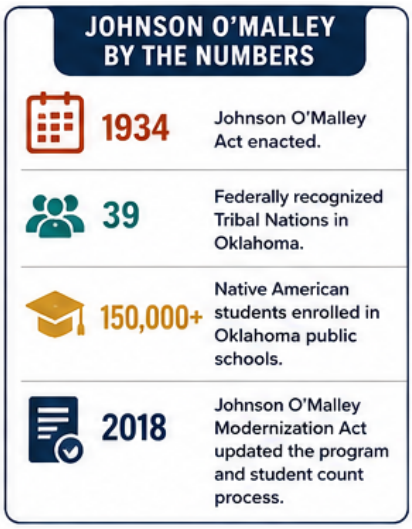
Over the past five years, we have had 184 students receive the Promise Scholarship and have sent over $1,000,000 in scholarship funds. We have seen our students set their goals and many achieve them. We have students that have completed one year welding certifications and a student that is currently in the process of earning her PhD. The Neodesha Promise/USD 461 partnership is working and is bridging the gap for our students from secondary to post secondary education.

Johnson O'Malley Program: Supporting the Educational Success of American Indian Students

Lynn Thompson, Oklahoma Academy Research Committee

For more than 90 years, the Johnson O'Malley (JOM) Program has provided supplemental educational services designed to help American Indian and Alaska Native students succeed in school while preserving their cultural identity. Established through the Johnson O'Malley Act of 1934, the program represents one of the federal government's longest standing commitments to supporting Native students attending public schools. Today, the program continues under the administration of the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) and was modernized through the Johnson O'Malley Supplemental Indian Education Program Modernization Act of 2018.

Unlike traditional education funding, Johnson O'Malley dollars are intended to supplement rather than replace existing educational services. The program recognizes that many American Indian students benefit from educational opportunities that strengthen both academic achievement and cultural identity. Local programs vary based on community needs but commonly include tutoring, literacy initiatives, language preservation, cultural enrichment, college and career readiness, attendance improvement, dropout prevention, family engagement, and after school programming. Schools and Tribal partners work together to determine which services will have the greatest impact on student success.



The program is unique because it is locally driven. Eligible recipients include federally recognized Tribal organizations, Indian corporations, state education agencies, and public school districts that establish local Indian Education Committees (IECs). These committees, composed primarily of parents of eligible students, review and approve local educational plans, helping ensure that programs reflect community priorities rather than a one size fits all approach. Federal regulations also require collaboration between school districts, Tribal governments, and families, reinforcing the importance of local decision making in improving educational outcomes.

Eligibility is defined by federal law. Students must be enrolled in a federally recognized Tribe or be at least one quarter degree Indian blood and a descendant of a member of a federally recognized Tribe eligible for Bureau of Indian Education services. Eligible students must be between the ages of 3 and grade 12, with priority historically given to children living on or near Indian reservations.

Johnson O'Malley funding is intentionally limited to supplemental educational services and may not be used for school construction or other capital expenditures. Instead, the funds are directed toward programs that directly support student learning, academic achievement, cultural engagement, and student well being. This distinction reinforces the program's role as an enhancement to existing educational opportunities rather than a replacement for state or local education funding.

The 2018 Johnson O'Malley Modernization Act marked the first major update to the program in decades. Congress directed the Bureau of Indian Education to modernize eligibility requirements, improve the process for counting eligible students, and revise funding formulas to better reflect the number of students served. Prior to the modernization effort, funding allocations had relied on student counts that had remained largely unchanged since the mid 1990s, despite significant growth in the American Indian student population. The modernization process sought to create a more accurate and equitable distribution of federal resources among participating Tribes and school districts.

The Johnson O'Malley Program is especially important in Oklahoma. Home to 39 federally recognized Tribal Nations and one of the nation's largest populations of American Indian students, Oklahoma has extensive partnerships between Tribal governments and public schools. These collaborations provide educational opportunities that extend beyond the classroom by strengthening cultural connections, encouraging family engagement, and supporting students' academic success. As policymakers continue to examine ways to improve educational outcomes across the state, the Johnson O'Malley Program illustrates how federal, Tribal, and local partnerships can work together to meet the unique needs of students while honoring Tribal sovereignty and preserving cultural heritage.

Questions for Consideration

As Oklahoma continues to pursue improved educational outcomes for all students, several policy questions emerge:

- How can Oklahoma strengthen partnerships between public schools and Tribal Nations to improve student achievement?
- What additional support is needed to ensure eligible students have access to Johnson O'Malley services?
- How should student success be measured when programs emphasize both academic achievement and cultural engagement?
- Are there opportunities to better coordinate Johnson O'Malley services with other federal, state, and Tribal education initiatives?

Cherokee Nation language immersion school now independent

Chad Hunter and D. Sean Rowley, Cherokee Phoenix, June 29, 2026

Amendments to the Durbin Feeling Language Preservation Act that shift full oversight of the Cherokee Nation Immersion School to the tribe were passed and signed into law June 25.

Taught fully in the Cherokee language, the school, founded in 2001, had been part of the state charter program for 16 years.

"Our declaration of independence today is not because we have some list of grievances with the state of Oklahoma," Principal Chief Chuck Hoskin Jr. said. "We've decided that if we are going to revitalize our language, we have to do it. We have to have our system of accountability. That's why the amendments today set up a new board of education – an advisory board made up of fluent speakers, made up of education professionals – to oversee our own affairs."



Cherokee Nation Principal Chief Chuck Hoskin Jr. affixes his signature to amendments to the Durbin Feeling Language Preservation Act on June 25 in Tahlequah. The tribe is moving its Immersion School out of the Oklahoma charter system, citing sovereignty and self-governance (Chad Hunter/Cherokee Phoenix)

Hoskin signed the legislation during a special ceremony in Tahlequah at the Durbin Feeling Language Center, where the Immersion School is located. Earlier that same day, members of the Tribal Council voted 14-0 in favor of full oversight by the tribe. The vote comes on the heels of Chief Hoskin ending the school's charter agreement under authority the Council previously granted him.

"Today is us exercising our sovereignty again," Chief of Staff Corey Bunch said. "We're taking charge of what we're doing in our Cherokee language school."

The changes call for third-party accreditation, sought through the World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium rather than the Oklahoma State Department of Education. And while ending the state charter is not cost free, Hoskin said the impact will be manageable. Attendant state and federal funding linked to the charter amount to roughly $2.5 million annually. Hoskin said the Nation has the financial latitude to handle the extra expense.

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"The Durbin Feeling Language Act recognizes that preserving our language requires action, not just good intentions," Tribal Councilor and second-language speaker Codey Poindexter said. "It creates pathways for new speakers while honoring our first-language speakers who continue to guide us."

Cherokee Nation Immersion School classes are taught exclusively in the Cherokee language, both written and spoken. The Sequoyah syllabary is used for all print materials.

"This is one of the most incredible programs around anywhere in any effort to revitalize a Native language," Hoskin said. "You can go into this building, and you can see Cherokee babies that are hearing the first words they've ever heard in their lives in our language. That hasn't happened on this scale in a long, long time. It's a beautiful thing to see."

An inspired collaboration

Columbus, Indiana, Community Education Coalition

When faced with the complex reality of a changing economy and tougher competitive environment, business and community leaders of the small, Midwestern town of Columbus, Indiana turned to the inspired wisdom of its most revered resident— J. Irwin Miller.

It was the civic-minded Miller, one of this century's most successful industrialists and late chairman and CEO of Cummins, who believed that companies should not only be responsible to their shareholders—but to their communities as well. The visible expression of Millers' beliefs are evident in the modern architectural treasures that punctuate the Columbus skyline. But, his core beliefs of using the power of place and community collaboration to solve grand challenges that span public, private, and social sectors, are key to what gave birth to the Community Education Coalition.

Business Formed Partnership With Education

Born of people and passion for a civic process, the Community Education Coalition (CEC) today represents a 20-year partnership of education, business, and community leaders focused on aligning and integrating the Columbus, Indiana and region's community learning system with economic growth and an improved quality of life.

CEC is a noteworthy, yet unexpected, example of private business stepping up to improve public education. The results thus far are evident in two major buildings, significant national recognition, and ongoing initiatives to bolster educational attainment for all in the small, primarily rural, southeastern Indiana communities it serves. It's no accident that the built environment of the community propels CEC, and that many new and innovative ways of working formed out of the business community—significant partners in its founding.

Education, Economic Opportunity, and Community

In today's dynamically changing economy, employers need more than ever an educated, skilled workforce to fill jobs and perform the requisite tasks. What exists is an insufficient number of adults with postsecondary degrees and certifications to fill those roles. This challenge is not exclusive to Columbus or its surrounding communities. But, in meeting the challenge, a public/private coalition was needed.

In 1997, a coalition was formed with community stakeholders and major businesses in collaboration with educators. Much like a three-legged stool, with the legs representing education, business, and community, each is required to meet the challenges. CEC then began its relentless focus on opening opportunities and providing access to skills building tools and education for the local and regional population. With CEC's focus on increasing learning opportunities, the results include both brick-and-mortar buildings as well as life-building programs for its participants.

Columbus Learning Center

As one of CEC's first projects, the Columbus Learning Center (CLC) opened its doors in the fall of 2005. This uniquely innovative arc-shaped building was designed by Kevin Kennon of Kohn Pedersen Fox Architects. He describes the building's design symbolism: "The design of the Columbus Learning Center reflects the process of its coming-into-being. It symbolizes a dynamic community of strong individuals pulling together to shape building and landscape around the noble ideal of barrier-free learning."

The CLC building could best be described as a "bridge" that conveniently spans the campus locating classrooms and student services for Indiana University Purdue University Columbus (IUPUC), Ivy Tech Community College, Purdue Polytechnic Institute, and WorkOne under one roof. Viewed by many to be a model of how higher education partners can collaborate, the Columbus Learning Center serves the needs of students, businesses, and communities. Within the CLC building stakeholder meetings are held, needs are raised, and analysis is made to launch the many projects and initiatives of CEC.

Five years after the CLC was dedicated, a second building, the Advanced Manufacturing Center of Excellence made possible by Lilly Endowment Inc. was opened to the public. It too is shared by IUPUC, Ivy Tech, and Purdue Polytechnic Institute for those pursuing education and training in Advanced Manufacturing, engineering, and technology-related careers.

Transformative Programs

Clearly, CEC does not exist in a onesize-fits-all world. With technological advancements, manufacturers' talent requirements can change with the winds of consumer demand. Traditional students are increasingly being defined as non-traditional. And communities continue to desperately strive to be cultural magnets for economic growth. CEC programs and initiatives have been conceived to meet the current and future workforce needs of business, and to offer multiple educational pathways for all learners to become successful—which ultimately results in better outcomes for the community-at-large.

Because of the collaborative nature of CEC and CivicLab's Stakeholder Engagement Process model, these programs and initiatives benefit from bimonthly meetings of a coalition of stakeholders—local business, education, and civic leaders to discuss challenges and formulate responsive solutions to address them.

Transformative programs supported by CEC include: STEM Seamless Pathway/ Adult Education Consortium; Indiana University School of Art, Architecture + Design offering the J. Irwin Miller Architecture Program; Latino

Education Outreach; Council for Youth Development; iGrad Program; Dream It Do It Career Awareness; After School Coalition; Early Child Education Network; and EcO Regional Networks (Advanced Manufacturing, Healthcare Network, and Attainment Network)

The EcO (Economic Opportunities through Education) Network connects key stakeholders and concentrates on areas of advanced manufacturing, healthcare and educational attainment in ten surrounding southeast Indiana counties. Recently, in recognition of the successes of the EcO programs, the national Lumina Foundation designated Columbus and its Southeast Indiana region as a national Talent Hub. This designation is given to communities that successfully organize and align themselves around goals that lead to an increase in postsecondary degrees and certifications that are earned.

With the Lumina Talent Hub designation, CEC will dedicate increased focus on educational attainment among the Latino and low-income populations that have no postsecondary degrees or credentials. This is a positive pathway that assists adults regionally who now will have the opportunity to increase their education levels, and improve their employment opportunities.

What these transformative programs and initiatives do best, is cultivate and grow a pool of talent serving a community by attracting investment, increasing personal prosperity, and creating a sense of place.

A Model For The Future

The work of CEC is successful because it seeks to align the goals of education with business and utilizes data to help move forward. In 2012, Columbus was the number one metropolitan statistical area (MSA) in the nation for job growth. It ranked fourth in the nation for GDP growth and had the lowest unemployment rate of any MSA in the State of Indiana. The city's average weekly wages are thirty percent higher than the rest of the state. Weekly wages for workers in the manufacturing sector are forty percent higher than the state average.

All told, Columbus has shown that the quality of place has the power to attract and develop great pools of talent. And that talent, in turn, has built a regional community of true excellence based on the process of collaboration.

PROGRAMS & INITIATIVES

Regional EcO Network

EcO Network focuses on increasing educational attainment by creating a regional system of life-long learning linked to the economic sectors that are the most well-paying in Southeast Indiana—currently advanced manufacturing and health care. Stakeholders involved include education, community foundations, industry representing more than one hundred manufacturers and all seven hospitals, workforce, government, and community leaders. EcO is the largest of the Community Education Coalition's regional initiatives.

The work of EcO, is defined by 3 goals:

1. **Move residents up at least one level in education, training, and/or job.**
2. **Coordinate a regional learning system.**
3. **Be a catalyst for regional leadership and collaboration.**

Early Childhood Education

n Responding to assessments showing that a third of children entering Kindergarten were inadequately prepared, a three-year pilot project was implemented within Bartholomew County in 2010 and focused on the benefits of Early Childhood Education. While continued funding via property tax assessment has been unsuccessful, the project remains an ongoing agenda item for the Early Childhood Consortium.

Lumina Talent Hub Designation

In September, 2017, Community Education Coalition (CEC) and its EcO Network initiative received a designation by Lumina Foundation as a Talent Hub, one of 24 communities across America to be so designated. This designation acknowledges EcO Network's exemplary status among peer communities, and elevates the region's effective work to create systemic change for postsecondary learners to a national level.

The Lumina Talent Hub grant supports a regional initiative focused on increasing the educational attainment rate of adults with no college education in Southeast Indiana. The initiative will provide specific supports to help remove barriers to educational success for Latino and low-income adults, in partnerships with employers, Ivy Tech Community College and our region's Adult Education providers.

iGrad

With the region's high school dropout rates hovering at 16%, a Community Impact Project sponsored by the Community Education Coalition and conducted by Cummins Six Sigma professionals developed an initiative to intervene and mentor middle school students at risk of failing high school. Utilizing Six Sigma analytical tools, iGrad was designed in cooperation with Ivy Tech Community College-Columbus, Cummins Inc., Bartholomew County School Corporation, and Flat RockHawcreek School Corporation.

iGrad provides graduation coaches to work with students in grades 8-12 to ensure they receive the academic, social, health, and community support needed to successfully complete high school and enter college. It's an effort to shift the culture, so that these students know they are part of a team that will do "whatever it takes" to ensure their success. Success is reflected in the number of students that self-refer, and the challenge is securing enough coaches to meet the need.







On September 16, 2005, Columbus, Indiana dedicated the first shared-use facility in the state supporting Indiana University Purdue University Columbus (IUPUC), Ivy Tech Community College, and Purdue Polytechnic Institute under one roof. One of the first projects of the CEC, the Columbus Learning Center (CLC) building could best be described as a "bridge" that conveniently spans the campus locating classrooms, a shared university library and student services. Viewed by many to be a model of how higher education partners can collaborate, the Columbus Learning Center serves the needs of students, businesses, and communities. Within the CLC building, stakeholder meetings are held, ideas and needs are raised, and relationships are made to launch the many projects and initiatives of CEC stakeholders.

Latino Education Outreach

n The Latino Education initiative both identifies and seeks to close the educational gaps facing the Latino population in Southeast Indiana. At the same time, the Latino Education Outreach Program, a public/private partnership, provides a full suite of services to Latinos and their families. Two counties in the region have the most significant Latino populations due to their manufacturing base and a maturing Latino community. With support from the Community Education Coalition, they are addressing the current challenges of the education and workforce systems by working together with industry and education leaders to develop strategies and programs intended to increase the education attainment levels of the Latino community.

GROWING SUCCESSFUL PARTNERSHIPS

The success that CEC has brought to the people of Columbus and region it serves, relies on the strength of its partnerships. These are the different initiatives that have resulted from partnerships with business, education, and civic leaders:

EcO Network

- Launched in partnership with Heritage Fund - The Community Foundation of Bartholomew County and Southeast Indiana's community foundations, the EcO Network is CEC's most comprehensive initiative. The EcO Network consists of education, business, and community leaders coordinating the region's learning system with economic growth and quality of life. This work has been generously supported over the years by Lilly Endowment Inc.

Lumina Foundation Talent Hub Designation

- CEC and EcO Southeast Indiana are designated a national Talent Hub by Lumina Foundation in September, 2017.

IUPUC, Ivy Tech Community College, Purdue Polytechnic Columbus

- Start up and growth of Business, Education, Nursing, Computer Technology, Mechanical Engineering Technology, & B.S. in Mechanical Engineering

Columbus Learning Center

- On September 16, 2005, Columbus dedicated the first shared-use facility in the state among Indiana University, Purdue University, Ivy Tech Community College, WorkOne, and the community. Designed by lead architect Kevin Kennon and a team from Kohn Pedersen Fox, the building's ownership, operating, and financing is unique in the State.

SoAA+D

- Indiana University formed a partnership with CEC to establish an educational center in downtown Columbus specializing in art and design, known as the Indiana University School of Art, Architecture + Design Columbus, as well as the founding of the J. Irwin Miller Architecture Program.

Advanced Manufacturing Center of Excellence

- Shared by IUPUC, Ivy Tech,and Purdue Polytechnic Columbus, the center contains classrooms, teaching laboratories, and support services for students and employees pursuing education and training in Advanced Manufacturing and technology-related careers. With support from Cummins, and designed by world-renowned architect Cesar Pelli, the center is home to a Meteorology Lab for use by students and the region's employers.

CivicLab

- An Institute for Civic Collaboration CivicLab creates the frameworks that form the foundation for the practice of community collaboration. CivicLab's approach is to learn what makes community collaboration work at its best, document the discoveries, and teach and share the practices broadly.

Stakeholders seek 'greater scrutiny' for lagging virtual charter school performance

Kevin Eagleson, NonDoc, August 3, 2026



Teachers, administrators and some parents packed the Epic Charter Schools Board meeting on Wednesday, June 8, 2022. (Megan Prather)

Student outcomes at virtual charter schools are lagging behind brick-and-mortar charter schools and traditional public schools. While stakeholders acknowledge the complex situations and difficult dynamics that can drive online school enrollment, the Statewide Charter School Board is taking notice.

At the board's meeting July 13, Chairman Brian Shellem referenced the lackluster performance highlighted in a recent report published by the Oklahoma Center for Education Policy.

"I think every one of us is concerned with the direction we seem to be going with a lot of our virtual schools," Shellem said.

Released in May, the report found that virtual students' results on the ACT lag behind students at traditional public schools and in-person charter schools. Their results are lower in English, math and reading, but they are on par in science. However, science scores from career and college readiness assessments also lag behind, while virtual students' history scores surpass those from traditional public schools.

According to the report, 21 Oklahoma charter schools serve high school students statewide. Seven of those schools are virtual charter schools, which enroll nearly 18,000 students. The report found that 64 percent of those students are enrolled in Epic Charter Virtual High School. According to SCSB's data dashboard, Epic Charter Virtual High School served 14,517 students in the 2024-2025 school year.

"Virtual charter schools likely deserve greater scrutiny. They serve a majority of Oklahoma's charter high school students, yet their outcomes are weak, and in some cases, highly concerning," OCEP executive director Adam Tyner wrote in the report. "Their ACT composite scores are lower than those of both traditional public schools and in-person charter schools. Their [career and college readiness assessments] composite scores are far below those of the other sectors. Their four-year graduation rate is an alarming 54 percent overall and 49 percent for economically disadvantaged students."

Epic Superintendent Shaun Ross said tests show a "snapshot" of a student body derived from myriad circumstances, including kids who left traditional schools owing to bullying, mental health challenges and complex family situations. Still, he acknowledged that virtual charters are "behind the curve" compared to traditional public schools.

"Epic Charter is on its 16th [year] and so, we are behind the curve, but we are also young, and again it is important for us to see what those scores are, take stock of what they are," Ross said. "The reality is we have those scores and

really do our dead-level best — use our professional judgement, make those best-case decisions — in order to help support the wide swath of kids that we have."

He also acknowledged that Epic's graduation rate — in its history — has not "crested 60 percent." He chalked that up — in part — to the makeup of the students the school attracts.

"We have a lot of kids that just come in that are significantly behind credit-wise. We mirror Tulsa Public Schools and Oklahoma City Public Schools in the number of kiddos that we have that are behind academically as far as high school credits go," Ross said.

He suggested that Epic has a unique advantage it needs to lean into more — credit recovery. He said the school has two credit recovery options: one that has "the same exact curriculum" and an "ancillary" option that he said has some of the non-essential "fluff" taken out.

"It is one of those things that we have had, but we have had some self-made barriers that have kept kids in credit-deficient positions," Ross said. "So one of the things that we are working on this year is eliminating as many of those barriers as we can."

Although he has only been leading the school since December, Ross said Oklahoma's most well-known virtual school had not been meeting students' needs.

"In short, our product was not matching the needs of our clients. We have got to do better at supporting kids' learning," Ross said. "I know we are a virtual setting, but we still have certified teachers that meet and connect with kids. It does not need to be a checklist — 'We have checked on Jimmy.' It needs to be, 'We work with Jimmy in order to close the gaps that we are seeing through his academic data.'"

Ross said Epic is in the process of reversing that course by hiring additional reading specialists, counselors and social workers while also increasing support offerings in math and English language arts.

"I guess the best way I could put it would be, we need to be a one-size-fits-one instead of a one-size-fits-all," Ross said.

Meanwhile, the OCEP report also cited a longer-term study that found lagging outcomes are not a new phenomenon in Oklahoma.

"A longitudinal Oklahoma study using data from 2016 to 2019 and focusing on students in rural areas likewise found large negative associations for virtual school students, with especially large losses in math and negative effects for all grade bands," Tyner wrote. "[Center for Research on Education Outcomes'] 2023 national charter study found similarly large negative results for virtual charter students, including especially large math losses."

In an interview, Tyner put it plainly: The performance lag goes beyond Oklahoma, according to CREDO reachers" findings.

"They are at Stanford, and they have done a bunch of work comparing charters to traditional public schools and breaking out virtual charters, and they pretty consistently find — and this is national work — that virtual charter schools underperform other sectors. So it is not just an Oklahoma finding to find underperformance of virtual charter schools," Tyner said. "That is something that we find nationally, relatively consistently."

SCSB's data dashboard also reflects lower performance by virtual charter schools. Composite proficiency for virtual charter schools was lower than brick-and-mortar charter schools and traditional public schools.

However, according to the data dashboard, one virtual charter — Oklahoma Connections Academy — outperformed or matched traditional public school performance in the 2024-2025 school year. Part of Pearson with a national headquarters in Baltimore, Oklahoma Connections Academy served 560 students during the specified school year and outperformed traditional public schools by 11 percent.

'The hybrid option is really where the future is'

While House Speaker Kyle Hilbert (R-Bristow) said he had not seen OCEP's new report, he believes face-to-face interaction with a highly qualified instructor cannot be supplanted by virtual instruction.

"Now, that does not mean that there is not a place for [virtual schools]," Hilbert said. "There are certain situations where parents choose to enroll their children in virtual schools, and that is the parents' choice. But when you are talking about traditional brick-and-mortar schools, the outcomes are going to be better in front of a teacher in person."

Tyner hypothesized that virtual charter schools' underperformance can be attributed to a variety of reasons, like special education students who require additional assistance or homeschool students who join a virtual school at a lower level of education than their peers.

"Some of those students are coming in way behind. Of course, traditional public schools have a lot of those issues as well, but I think it is probably a disproportionate problem in virtual charters," Tyner said. "They are dealing with a different student population, and there is no question about that."

He also noted what he called a "moral hazard" with virtual charter schools.

"If you think about it, you are taking a student funding formula that is developed for brick-and-mortar schools that kind of assumes that you are going to have a lunch lady, a school nurse and a building and all of this stuff, and then you are kind of putting this technology on top of it. The marginal cost of 100 students in a brick-and-mortar school is significant. (…) I think that those [virtual] costs are probably much lower at the margin," Tyner said. "Behind most of these virtual charter schools, there is a for-profit company that is really trying to minimize costs and raise revenue. So that means more students with less money delivered to them. Of course, they are run by nonprofit boards, but there is typically a for-profit company behind them, and that nonprofit is more or less a shell that is just there to facilitate this governance structure. I think that there is a reason why virtual charter schools have gotten into a lot of trouble across the country. We are talking about outcomes, and I think it is related to that."

Shellem suggested that the lag in performance could be attributed to a lack of engagement.

"I do not think that the level of intelligence is the real factor here," Shellem said. "I think it is the engagement process that is the problem."

Shellem noted that virtual charter schools have been successful for some, such as for the state's youngest registered nurse, who graduated from Epic and received recognition at an SCSB meeting in May. To tackle the engagement element of education, Shellem said a screening process for enrollees could ensure they are set up for success.

"That is what I am advocating for. [Do] we need to change some legislation and say, 'You know what? There should be a screening process so that parents engage,'" Shellem said. "I think the fundamental thing is, I believe a lot of kids can learn. Some are going to have different learning challenges, of course, but it is typically the engagement part. We have all heard that showing up is half the battle. Well, if we can get the kids to show up and engage, there are some phenomenal teachers out there that can do amazing things."

Such a screening requirement could pose a heavy lift legislatively and legally.

"There are schools today that turn away students. They are called private schools," said Rep. Andy Fugate (D-Del City). "If it is public school, it should be open to all kids in the state of Oklahoma."

Shellem also floated the idea that virtual options with requirements for one-day-a-week, in-person meetings could offer a solution and a possible course correction moving forward.

"The idea is (…) these kids are going to be engaged with a real person. There is going to be a relationship there, not just through a screen," Shellem said. "I love that concept, more than 100 percent virtual. Because typically kids — and this is a proven fact — kids do not typically rebel against authority. They rebel against a lack of relationship."

Ross, Epic's superintendent, said he tends to "agree with the premise" that a more hybrid model "is a viable, potentially realistic sense of what education will be in the not-so-distant future."

"I think if you point toward the push of [career tech] and post-secondary and college career readiness and really getting certifications for students, I think you are going to have to open up to those opportunities where kids can go work with vocational schools or kids can go work and work with organizations, companies and get that real life experience and still have their academic needs met," Ross said.

Shellem acknowledged that such a shift could be a heavy burden financially and logistically, although he suggested that "underutilized resources" like closed school buildings or vacant classrooms could offer opportunities.

"You could have these different things that [require] they are going to come and they are going to meet there once a week. And if it is once a week, then maybe another school meets there once a week, and there is five days during the week. I am throwing out ideas. I am not saying they are right. I am saying we should be exploring all avenues of how we can come up with solutions that will meet the need," Shellem said. "The first, easiest step is to go, 'Let's find students who are going to be really self-driven.' Let's keep that target going because it is obviously doing very well for a handful. And then you go, 'Where are we missing, where the vast majority — some of these kids probably should not be in virtual at all — and how do we get them plugged back into either a brick-and-mortar or a specialized school that meets their needs differently?' (…) I think the hybrid option is really where the future is."

Read the full Oklahoma's Public High School Outcomes by Sector report at https://nondoc.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/May-2026-OCEP-report-on-high-school-outcomes-by-sector.pdf .

Oklahoma data shows lack of fully trained teachers entering the classroom

Nuria Martinez-Keel, Oklahoma Voice, July 23, 2026

State leaders say they're still pursuing solutions to reverse a yearslong decline in traditionally trained teachers entering the classroom, all while emergency certified educators continue to fill essential teaching roles.

The number of graduates completing Oklahoma teacher preparation programs, including college degrees in education, has fallen by about 40% since 2013, state officials told the Oklahoma State Board of Education on Thursday.

Traditionally certified educators who completed these programs have represented less than half of all first-year teachers entering the state's public schools since 2018.

To help fill in the gap, Oklahoma districts hire thousands of emergency certified teachers, who might not have traditional classroom training, when a candidate with full or partial credentials is unavailable. Uncertified adjunct instructors, who must have relevant career experience but aren't required to have a college degree, also have taken on a growing role in public schools.

The state Board of Education has placed increasing scrutiny on Oklahoma's reliance on emergency certified teachers, who were a rarity a decade and a half ago. The board votes monthly to issue emergency certifications.

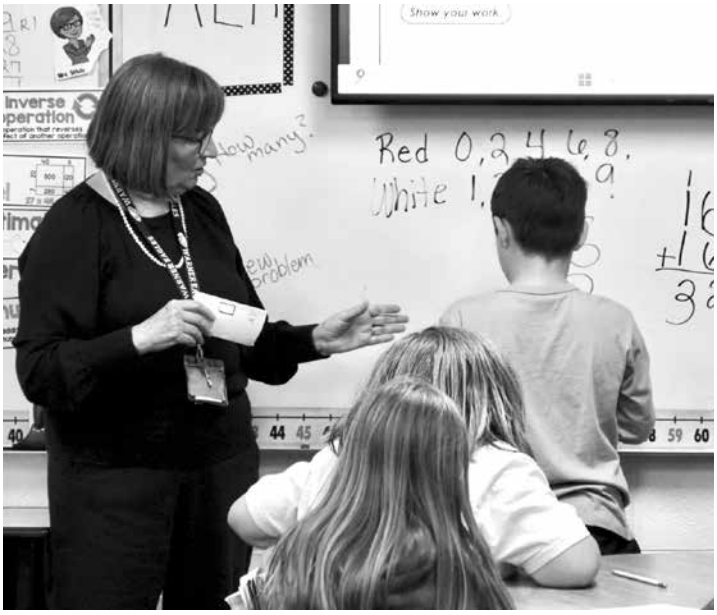
"I'm not against it," said Becky Carson, a retired teacher and one of the most vocal board members on the issue. "I just want to make sure that the educators that we're putting there are supported and we're giving them the right training and being able to remove those that might not be (in) the best place for them."

Oklahoma State Board of Education member Becky Carson speaks during a meeting Oct. 9 in Oklahoma City. (Photo by Nuria Martinez-Keel/Oklahoma Voice)
Research shows teacher quality and credentials impact student academic achievement, she said. If Oklahoma wants to rise from the bottom of national education rankings, Carson said, "we have to look at all aspects that could be of a concern that's putting us there."

The state issued 3,928 emergency certifications for the 2025-26 school year, state data shows.

So far, 1,392 more have been approved for 2026-27, said Jeff Smith, program director for teacher certification at the Oklahoma State Department of Education.

More than 470 of those teachers are renewing past emergency certifications, he said.



Warner Elementary teacher Pam White directs a student to complete a math problem on the whiteboard in her fourth-grade math classroom on Dec. 10 in Warner. Fewer fully certified teachers, like White, are entering Oklahoma public schools today. (Photo by Nuria Martinez-Keel/Oklahoma Voice)

The number of applicants seeking renewals — some as many as eight times after failing to pass certification tests or not completing required coursework — has been one of the state board members' top complaints.

Sixty of the 638 applicants approved Thursday have been issued an emergency certificate more than three times, according to an Oklahoma Voice analysis of state records. Emergency certifications are typically renewed every one to two years, according to state administrative codes.

"Why are we having people that are having to ask for that renewal eight times?" Carson said. "Why aren't we being able to get them to pass the test if that's the reason?"

Data agency staff presented at the board's meeting Thursday showed the stark reality of the pipeline feeding Oklahoma's teacher workforce.

Emergency certified educators, once considered a stop-gap measure, were the most common of all first-year teachers in 2025. They represented 38.8% of teachers in their first year and more than 5% of all Oklahoma educators, state officials said.

Traditionally certified educators made up 87.8% of the overall teacher workforce in 2025 and only 37.1% of those in their first year, but their numbers could rise in 2026. So

far, they represent 45.5% of 2026 first-year teachers, but state data doesn't yet reflect the full hiring cycle.

Provisional educators, who have completed some requirements but still have testing or coursework to complete, represented 7.6% of all teachers and 24.1% of first-year educators last year.

That presents a striking difference from 2010, when emergency certifications amounted to 0.5% of incoming new teachers. Those with traditional certifications counted for 96.3% of the classroom teacher workforce and 64.7% of first-year entrants. The rest held a provisional certificate.

The data sheds light on an "unfortunate situation" that state leaders must work together to solve, said Rep. Dick Lowe, R-Amber. The state House Common Education Committee leader, who attended the board meeting Thursday, said he's going to participate in interim studies and a working group with the state Board of Education to explore solutions.

"I think if you look at those numbers, you kind of understand where our test scores are, where they're at and why they've been there," Lowe said of Oklahoma's poor academic results.

The weakening teacher pipeline wasn't a shock to Carson, she said, given how many educators complain of classroom behavior issues and a lack of support.

State lawmakers in recent years have increased minimum teacher salaries, created scholarship programs for aspiring educators and established other perks in the hopes of combatting the education workforce shortage.

A state initiative known as TeachForward is helping 450 emergency certified educators earn a standard certification within one year, Education Department staff said Thursday. Six Oklahoma universities partnered with the program to offer accelerated coursework and exams at no out-of-pocket cost to participants.

The agency also touted a program it will launch Monday to give 463 early career teachers a week of professional development and mentoring throughout the school year. The program serves first- and second-year teachers with any type of certification.

State Superintendent Lindel Fields expressed enthusiasm for the program's potential to help retain participating teachers in the classroom long term.

"There's a lot of talk about recruiting teachers. The real problem is keeping teachers," Fields said during the state Board of Education meeting. "Everything we can do to help those teachers be successful in this program is super exciting."

Teachers say they don't feel supported. But what does authentic, genuine support look like?

Alissa Alteri Shea, Truth for Teachers Collective, June 22, 2022

"Do you live here?", one of my students asked as we were putting on our coats to head outside for dismissal.

"No," I answered. "But sometimes it certainly feels like I do."

The pandemic has blurred the lines between home and school for many teachers. It lingers like an uninvited guest who has overstayed their welcome, overshadowing the work we do every day, with worries of school staying with us wherever we go.

Whether you are a School Board member, district leader, principal, teacher, parent, or student, you know how emotionally challenging this has been. The pandemic is not something any of us wanted. But here we are, over two years later, exhausted from the havoc it has left behind in our schools.

Since I am a classroom teacher, I know this story best from inside the classroom walls. But, there are other ways of seeing it, and one thing I know for sure is that no one's role in this pandemic has been easy.

Classroom teachers have a unique perspective because we are the ones who have experienced the pandemic with the children. We are the ones who have welcomed them into our classrooms each day while still struggling to find our way through the logistical, cultural, and political battles of Covid-19. We are the ones who shaped pandemic learning day after day for our students, trying to offer comfort and certainty when there was little to offer.

And we are tired.

NPR reports that teachers this year are leaving in droves. Becky Pringle, president of the National Education Association, says, "Without exception, every stop I made, from Kentucky to Oakland, I heard those similar stories of educators who were exhausted, overwhelmed, feeling unloved, disrespected." Unfortunately, this is true in schools all across America.

Is there anything we can do about it?

What does authentic, genuine support look like for teachers?

How can school leaders retain the talented teachers our students need?

I believe change can happen when policies are put in place, systems are established, and teachers receive the support they need to do their jobs well. These policies often start at the top.

Here's some advice for school leaders who want to keep great educators in the classroom, followed by tips for teachers to get the support they need.

The School Leader's Role In Retaining Teachers

1. Facilitate healing conversations

For teachers to move past the trauma they have faced, we must facilitate healing conversations. During the pandemic, classrooms closed down overnight, with students never returning to projects only half complete. Teaching routines were constantly interrupted, moving between remote, hybrid, and in-person learning without planning or training.

Conflicts arose at every turn, and teachers did not always agree on the best way forward. Nor did they always feel included or supported by those making decisions that put their health and livelihood at risk. At the same time, some teachers faced unprecedented and unwarranted criticism and threats over the curriculum they chose to include or not include in their classrooms.

These enormous losses and upheavals can't be overlooked. For a community to move forward, they have to be addressed and discussed together as a staff, led by someone trained and competent at facilitating conversations where all voices can be heard. When a safe place is created for difficult emotions to be spoken, past trauma can begin to heal, and teachers can come together as a community that supports each other in the demanding work in front of them.

2. Be present

It is essential for school leaders to be present in classrooms to see teachers' current challenges up close. Some of the best school leaders I've worked with are the ones who did daily walkthroughs in my classroom and spent a couple of minutes quietly observing what was happening. The intention of these non-evaluatory visits was to get a pulse of the school to know the strengths and the needs of teachers and children working there.

So when I went to my principal for support, they could say, "Yes, I understand. I've seen that happening. Let's problem-solve together." Or when my principal wanted to offer me a suggestion or a compliment, it was based on actual work I was doing, "The flexible seating you've arranged for your class seems to be working. How did you come up with that?" With specific, genuine feedback instead of empty praise, teachers feel seen, valued, and heard.

Schools leaders and instructional coaches need to spend time in classrooms. Help teachers see what's going well and what needs to be adjusted. Then, when you make decisions or offer solutions, you know from experience what your teachers are dealing with.

For example, have you ever tried teaching enthusiastically and compassionately to a room full of children with a mask on for six hours? Do you understand how challenging that is? If not, give it a try to see what it looks and feels like. Then when you sit down at the table to have conversations about classroom practice, teachers know you care.

3. Honor teachers' time

As teaching methods constantly change during the pandemic, every minute counts for teachers who never have enough time. Having agendas and clearly outlined objectives for meetings values teachers' time. Providing teachers with a 30-minute duty-free lunch and separate planning time each day honors teachers' time. Allowing them to do what they need to do — design learning and instruction for their students — shows you understand how important their work is.

Due to pandemic staff shortages, teachers have consistently lost the planning time they need to do their jobs well. That must come back. One of the most important things school leaders can do to support teachers is hiring additional staff to cover unnecessary duties for teachers.

Find ways to give educators the time they need to plan, reflect, learn about a new curriculum, evaluate student work, meet with colleagues, and communicate with parents.

Hire community members, parents, or other school employees to cover planning periods, lunch duties, and recess coverage so teachers can accomplish their essential work when they are not in front of students.

If these tasks are not completed during the school day, they must be done after teachers' contractual hours. This is a huge factor leading to exhaustion and teacher burnout today.

4. Use shared decision-making

When developing solutions to address today's challenges, teachers must be part of the conversation. They need a place to offer their professional opinions based on real-life classroom experience. When school leaders consistently make decisions without them, teachers feel unheard. Whether it is the purchase of a new curriculum or creating a school masking policy, bring teachers to the table to create a shared vision for moving forward.

Use efficient protocols to gather and reflect on the knowledge of your staff. Facilitate faculty meetings that are safe places to share ideas and discuss issues. On a district level, give teachers a representative seat on the School Board or leadership team to have a voice in decision-making.

With Google Forms, it is easy to survey the teachers in your school or district to hear their suggestions and concerns about what is happening in the classroom. Be transparent about the results and share them with the staff. Then, pull it apart and discuss it together. But then, most importantly, follow through on their recommendations and use that information to shape policy, protocol, and standard procedures that affect teachers' workdays.

Of course, not everyone will get their wishes to come true, but just knowing your voice was heard and considered by all is empowering, makes teachers feel valued, and goes a long way in creating a shared vision where people feel included.

5. Communicate clearly

Things are constantly changing in schools depending on the current state of the virus, politics, or other pandemic impacts, making timely communication essential. Well-organized systems are needed to move hundreds of children in and out of a school safely each day. These systems need to be communicated clearly for a school to operate efficiently.

School leaders can update staff regularly by having a weekly staff newsletter with helpful information, encouragement, questions answered, agendas, and procedures outlined. There is comfort and reassurance in the clarity of details. The more organized these daily operational procedures are, the more teachers can focus on teaching.

With the pandemic, the need for school-wide protocols was increased significantly. Where are students eating indoors? How are we controlling traffic flow in the halls to avoid overcrowding?Who's providing coverage for absent teachers? How are we evaluating and responding to increased student needs?

These are important systemic decisions that need to be determined together as a community, so all people feel heard and implemented consistently, so teachers are not left wondering. Without clear communication, teachers become overwhelmed by constantly creating and implementing the routines and policies that students need to make it through a successful school day.

6. Provide relevant professional development

This certainly is not the time to overload teachers with new ideas that are not directly related to surviving the upheavals of pandemic teaching. Instead, teachers need training in dealing with the overwhelming immediate issues confronting them each day.

How do we account for the growing range of abilities due to inequitable learning environments at home during the pandemic? How do we care for students' social-emotional health? How do we build back trust in our schools? How do we provide manageable workloads for teachers? These are essential issues that need to be addressed by giving teachers the relevant professional training they need to meet the

current demands of their jobs. Other important initiatives must wait.

During the pandemic, teachers had to bring their classrooms online overnight, and many of us had little or no training on how to do this. This leads to huge amounts of stress when you are left to figure things out on your own or left to repeatedly seek out individual support. Give teachers training in the systems, pedagogy, and curriculum they are expected to implement in their classrooms.

Sometimes, this can look like bringing in trained experts to model best practices during faculty meetings or a professional development day. Sometimes it can look like bringing teachers together to learn from each other. Provide ways for teachers to take learning walks through each other's classrooms or set up mentors to support each other.

This year, I am in a Professional Learning Community (PLC) that meets once a month. The facilitator has every teacher upload a few pictures to a Google Slideshow of an activity they did during the month that worked well or a challenge they would like to get feedback on. By being in this space together, teachers share the highs and lows of what classroom life looks like right now. Community is formed as we celebrate successes, share strategies, and help each other through the challenges. Having dedicated time during contractual hours to do this and a facilitator who makes it happen helps teachers feel less alone, more supported, and valued in their work.

7. Listen to teachers

The needs of teachers will be different depending on your district, school, and student population. So how can you best support the teachers in your school?

Listen to their concerns. Take them seriously.

I have seen this happen through a "Rose, Thorn, and Bud" exercise at the end of a faculty meeting where each staff member anonymously writes one thing that is going well, one thing that is challenging, and one thing they are hoping for. Look to see if there are common themes. Bring the concerns back to the staff with transparency, use meetings or in-service days to problem-solve together, and develop a plan for moving forward.

Instead of encouraging "self-care" as a way to ease teachers' stress, come together as a community to care for each other by developing strategies to work through the challenges as a team. Ensure adequate support staff is available to help teachers address students' current academic and mental health needs — so they are not shouldering those burdens alone. Don't ignore the challenges, ask for positive comments only, or walk back into your office and shut the door. Be present and be a part of the solution.

If you are a district leader or School Board member, this activity can also be done anonymously through Google Forms and lets you hear directly from your teachers. Taking the time to listen to teachers' voices and acknowledge that you heard them shows you genuinely care. It is a way to receive honest feedback about systemic policies and gives teachers a place to speak freely about the challenges facing your school community so you can see where change must happen.

WHAT CAN TEACHERS DO TO GET THIS KIND OF SUPPORT?

1. Create a solidarity team

Teachers need a supportive community to help them navigate the revolving door of changes and expectations the pandemic has brought to our classrooms. Look for other like-minded teachers in your school or district to discuss these challenges. If that community is not available, look online for support, ideas, and inspiration.

This year, I found tremendous support through the Truth For Teachers community and Edutopia, where other educators share stories of best practices. When I was out of ideas, they had some great ones to offer. In the same way, it was rewarding for me to provide others with similar support. There is satisfaction in giving and receiving feedback from others experiencing the same challenges. These online communities consist of positive, realistic, forward-thinking teachers who, on many days, gave me the hope or practical support I needed to keep going.

2. Speak up

Advocate with other teachers in your school to the administration or School Board for changes that need to happen, such as abiding by the language in your contract or making sure adequate safety protocols are in place in your building. Speaking up as a group is a powerful tool, especially if you can find solidarity with others in your school.

Seek help from your local or state teachers' union if you are a part of one and know the rights you have in your contract. Your union leadership team can bargain for a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), a legal document describing an agreement between the union and school district, for changes in contractual language that meet the demands of today's learning environment. This MOU can establish better working conditions for teachers and is often an excellent place to start creating change.

If you cannot find solidarity with colleagues, don't be afraid to speak up on your own. Write letters, attend meetings, advocate for what you know your students need. No one knows your students and their needs better than you, so don't be afraid to speak up to the people who set policies for your school.

For example, when remote learning was not working for my first graders, I advocated loudly to school administration and our School Board for an outdoor learning program to be established at our school in response to the pandemic. I worked hard with other teachers and parent volunteers

to make that happen. What are your needs? What are the challenges that face your school or classroom? Make those concerns known to those in leadership roles and try to get others to speak up with you.

3. Set boundaries

For your health and well-being, set limits on how much time you devote to school. You most likely work under a contract, and after your contractual hours are over, you have control of how many hours you give to schoolwork.

Find ways to focus your energy during the day to be as productive as possible and accomplish the essential tasks on your list. Then at some point, say, "This is enough." Make a plan to leave school (and the heavy teachers' bag full of work) behind, and head home to care for yourself and your family.

You are important, and your time is important. The thing your students need most is a healthy, caring adult to show up and be present for them every day. The best way to do this is to find ways to care for yourself and set boundaries on how much time you will give to work. Take deep breaths and remember you are doing the best you can, and that will have to be enough.

4. Leave the door open to other possibilities

Some of you may be in the position of having given all you can to your current school, and it still is not a good fit for you. Listen to the signs your body is giving you. I've heard stories of teachers crying in their car before entering the building or being up all night worrying if they had the strength to return in the morning. These are signs it is time to move on to another school, another district, another job.

Remember that the door is open. It is empowering to know that you can search for better options for yourself. If your employer no longer meets your needs at this point in your career, you can look for a new employer whose values line up better with your professional goals. If you need support in doing this, check out the Teacher Career Coach for a community that will support you every step of the way.

These strategies have always been an essential part of building strong, healthy school communities but are even more critical now as we face daunting challenges the pandemic has left behind. So let's make sure these supports are in place for our teachers. Let's do all we can to hear their voices, support their work, and find ways to make it more sustainable. The well-being of our students and the success of our communities in a post-pandemic world depends on us.

Notes

This is a resource document for you to use.
Take notes, highlight, use as a text book.

OPINION: Too many Oklahoma teachers are retiring too soon

Alexis Bowen, The Oklahoman, December 21, 2025

Policymakers must stop a staggering educational crisis unfolding in Oklahoma: Only 23% of teachers remain in the profession after five years.



Educators throughout the state agree that this alarming rate of teacher attrition constitutes an unsustainable systemic failure that directly harms student achievement and Oklahoma's future. Teachers enter the classroom eager to facilitate student growth, but low self-efficacy and insufficient preparation often lead to "reality shock" and burnout, causing them to abandon their careers in large numbers.

Oklahoma policymakers must act decisively to change this trend. The solution is clear and supported by comprehensive research: amending the existing law on induction of teachers by requiring a three-year, high-quality mentor-teacher induction program. This proposal strengthens the foundation already established by the Oklahoma Teacher Preparation Act of 2023. Under this necessary change, a beginning teacher would participate in an intensive mentorship, working alongside a high-quality mentor during an internship in the first year. In the following two years, the teacher would continue to teach under the guidance of that same mentor. This multi-year support model, requiring dedicated collaboration time and consistent, on-site, expert guidance, is crucial because teaching mastery develops over time.

Research overwhelmingly supports that sustained, high-quality mentoring positively impacts retention rates, leading to more experienced educators in the classroom. Mentors are vital in boosting the self-efficacy of novice teachers by providing support, guidance and modeling effective practices. Furthermore, this continuous support helps beginning teachers gain exposure and practice in essential skills, such as effective classroom management strategies and evidence-based teaching practices, which are critical to student success.

According to the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching, mentoring also supports the development of reflective practices necessary for lifelong professional learning. The strongest argument against implementing this critical policy is often the fiscal burden. Mandating a three-year program featuring an intensive first-year internship, training and mentor compensation requires a consistent funding commitment. Investing in release time, professional development and adequate compensation for high-quality mentors is essential for program sustainability. However, this initial investment pales in comparison to the sustained cost of constant teacher turnover, which destabilizes schools and diminishes student learning.

Fortunately, Oklahoma is not left to fund this essential change alone. The federal government recognizes the value of these programs. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides Title II grants that states and school districts can use specifically for teacher mentoring, induction, and retention policy and procedures, covering costs such as stipends and training.

Furthermore, the Addressing Teacher Shortages Act of 2023 underscores the federal value placed on high-quality mentoring programs to improve retention rates. By adopting an amendment to this law that links this mandatory induction program to complete teacher certification, Oklahoma can transform the first years of teaching from a period of struggle and exhaustion into one of empowered professional growth. We must ensure this bill moves through the Legislature in the upcoming 2026 session.

The future success of Oklahoma's students hinges on securing a sustainable and qualified teaching workforce, which starts with a commitment to continuous support. We have the plan, the research, and the funding avenues; now we need the political will to implement this essential three-year mandatory mentorship.

Alexis Bowen is a doctoral candidate and dean of student services at Southern Nazarene University.

Trio of OU Programs Connecting & Empowering Rural Teachers & Administrators

Dana Branham, Sooner Magazine, Fall 2025

Early in her teaching career, Bailey Smith was overwhelmed. She taught Pre-K at a rural school in a classroom that included children with challenging behavior.

"I was that brand-new, first-year teacher who was lost," Smith says. "I didn't know what I was going to do, because the kids had needs that I had not been equipped or trained for."

She knew she needed help to best serve her students. So, Smith sought training through two University of Oklahoma Jeannine Rainbolt College of Education grant-funded programs, which led to her receiving a master's degree in special education and becoming a board-certified behavior analyst. The support was "life changing"— for both Smith and her students.

Today, Smith teaches at Friend Public School in Chickasha, Okla. As the school's special education director and only special education teach-er, she works with 24 of the small, rural school's roughly 200 students from Pre-K through 8th grade.

"I love it. I love changing kids' lives," Smith says. "Knowing I get to do that for the duration of my career is an amazing feeling."

Britanny Hott, an associate professor of special education and associate director of OU's Institute for Community and Society Trans-formation, leads the grant-funded programs that underwrote Smith's training. Each is aimed at connecting, empowering and developing highly trained, effective rural educators across Oklahoma. The programs are multipurpose: They give rural educators new skills to better serve their students, they train school-based mental health providers to fill gaps in rural schools and they allow OU researchers to measure the success of educational tools for students who need extra help to learn well.

Though their work is complex, a simple, unifying theme is at the heart of the three programs — Oklahomans helping Oklahomans.

"We're growing our own," says Hott. "We're collaborating with schools, saying, 'Send us your best, and we're going to give you our best.' Those relationships have continued to grow and spread and have been very successful."

The projects are designed to address rural educators' unique challenges, including geographic barriers, accessing broadband internet service, limited opportunities for professional development and the reality that teachers are overextended.

But the programs also tap into the often-overlooked might of rural communities.

"We talk about challenges so much that we forget about rural strengths," Hott says. "Often, the school is the community hub. There are generations of relationships and positive interactions within the community that supports the school."

For Smith, who is the sole special education teacher at Friend Public School, her participation in the CREATE project was a chance to connect with other educators in similar roles across Oklahoma. Together, they shared ideas and swapped advice.

"If you're the only special education teacher, very few people know, truly, all that goes into your role at a school," Smith says. "CREATE fosters that sense of community for special educators."

Broadly, the education field has difficulties with recruiting and retention, Hott says—about 40% of new teachers leave the field within their first five years. Those issues are only magnified in special education. But in the CREATE program, the team has celebrated 100% retention for participants, who are now well-equipped to serve their rural schools and communities.

Julie Atwood is a research scientist at OU supporting the PRIME program, which provides training to school counselors, social workers, board-certified behavior analysts and other mental health professionals.

In rural Oklahoma, a parent with a child who needs mental or behavioral health care may have to travel long distances to obtain services.

By training professionals who can offer these services in rural schools, Atwood says, "we remove that barrier for parents instead of traveling all the way to Oklahoma City or Norman to access services."

Atwood, who previously worked in schools as a board-certified behavioral analyst, is also working on her Ph.D., which is funded through SPIDERS.

"I would not have been able to get my Ph.D. without this program. There was just no way feasibly I could do it," she says. "Because I have this funding, I'm now able to work on our other grant projects and support educators in a way that I absolutely was not able to when I started my Ph.D."

Melissa Baughman is superintendent of Robin Hill Public School, an independent Pre-K through 8th-grade district in rural Norman. She is preparing to sit for an exam to become a board-certified behavior analyst, along with two of

her colleagues. Through the PRIME program, Baughman accessed training that is helping her better understand and work with students.

"When you get your degree to be a teacher, you're trained in classroom management, how to instruct and communicating with parents," she says. "But there's a lack of training about how to handle a situation when a student has a behavior that you don't understand—what do you do?"

Before the PRIME program, Baugman says she didn't have the means to address students' challenging behavioral needs in a way that furthered their learning. "PRIME gave us the tools. "PRIME, CREATE and SPIDERS also offer important insight into what works — and what doesn't — in rural school settings versus urban or suburban schools. "It sounds very simple, but it's not," Hott says. "It's nuanced and requires effort to determine what works for whom in the context of a rural community."



Oklahoma doles out Blue Ribbons after federal education officials suspend national award

Robby Korth, KOSU, December 5, 2025 and Public School Review

Oklahoma's State Department of Education is bringing back Blue Ribbon Awards for schools after the Trump administration took them away.

"These schools exemplify the very best of what education can achieve for students and communities," Superintendent Lindel Fields said. "Their dedication to excellence reflects Oklahoma's ongoing commitment to student success."

As the school year began, U.S. Department of Education officials told states they would suspend the prestigious, longstanding National Blue Ribbon Schools program indefinitely.

Federal officials said at the time that state education departments should take on the awards, and Oklahoma is doing just that. The Blue Ribbon schools were certified for nomination before the program was stopped.

Here are the recipients:

- Amber-Pocasset High School in Amber
- Arapaho-Butler Elementary School in Arapaho
- Fort Gibson High School in Fort Gibson
- Lomega Elementary School in Omega
- Santa Fe South Pathways Middle College in Oklahoma City
- Woodlands Elementary School in Ponca City

According to the website Public School Review:

- As of the 2026 school year, there are 77 recognized Blue Ribbon public schools serving 42,612 students in Oklahoma.



- Blue Ribbon schools have been recognized by the Department of Education for achieving superior standards of academic excellence. Read more about this national school awards program and how Blue Ribbon schools work.
- The top-ranked blue ribbon public schools in Oklahoma are Schwartz Elementary School, Sadler Arts Academy and Wayland Bonds Elementary School. Overall testing rank is based on a school's combined math and reading proficiency test score ranking.
- Oklahoma blue ribbon public schools have an average math proficiency score of 39% (versus the Oklahoma public school average of 25%), and reading proficiency score of 41% (versus the 27% statewide average).
- Minority enrollment is 49% of the student body (majority Hispanic and Black), which is less than the Oklahoma public school average of 56% (majority Hispanic and American Indian).

Building a Strong School Community: 5 Evidence-Based Strategies for Elementary Success

Dr. Leo Sparks, EDU.COM, October 16, 2025

Creating a thriving school community isn't just about test scores or classroom management—it's about fostering an environment where students, families, and educators work together toward shared goals. Research consistently shows that schools with strong community connections see improved student outcomes, higher family engagement, and more satisfied teachers. As someone who has analyzed educational data across hundreds of elementary schools, I've identified key patterns that distinguish truly connected school communities from those that struggle to build meaningful relationships.

A robust school community creates the foundation for academic success, social-emotional growth, and lifelong learning habits. When parents feel welcomed, teachers feel supported, and students sense belonging, the entire educational ecosystem flourishes. Let me share five data-driven strategies that elementary schools can implement to strengthen their community bonds and create lasting positive change.

1. Establish Clear Communication Channels That Work for All Families

Effective communication forms the backbone of any strong school community. However, research indicates that traditional communication methods often leave significant gaps, particularly for working parents or families with limited English proficiency.

The most successful elementary schools implement multi-channel communication systems. For example, Roosevelt Elementary in California increased parent engagement by 40% after introducing weekly text message updates in three languages, alongside their traditional newsletter. They discovered that brief, timely messages about classroom activities and upcoming events reached more families than lengthy monthly newsletters.

Consider implementing these communication strategies:

- Weekly text updates about classroom highlights and important dates
- Bilingual newsletters with visual elements for easy scanning
- Regular phone calls home to share positive student achievements
- Digital calendars that families can sync with their personal schedules
- Brief video messages from teachers explaining homework expectations

The key lies in consistency and accessibility. When families know exactly when and how they'll receive school information, they're more likely to stay engaged and participate in school activities.

2. Create Multiple Entry Points for Family Involvement

Traditional parent involvement models—such as daytime volunteering or attending evening meetings—often exclude working parents or caregivers with transportation challenges. Data from the National Education Association shows that schools offering diverse participation opportunities see 60% higher family engagement rates.

Lincoln Elementary School transformed their family involvement by introducing "micro-volunteering" opportunities. Parents could contribute by preparing materials at home, recording themselves reading books for classroom listening centers, or sharing their professional expertise through virtual career talks. These flexible options allowed more families to participate meaningfully in their children's education.

Successful family involvement strategies include:

- Home-based volunteer opportunities like cutting out classroom materials
- Flexible timing for school events, including weekend and early morning options
- Virtual participation options for meetings and presentations
- Skills-based volunteering that matches parents' professional expertise
- Student-led conferences where children share their learning progress

When schools provide multiple pathways for involvement, they signal that every family's contribution matters, regardless of their schedule or circumstances.

3. Build Authentic Relationships Through Shared Experiences

Strong school communities develop through meaningful shared experiences that extend beyond academic requirements. Research from the University of Chicago demonstrates that schools emphasizing relational trust see significantly higher student achievement gains compared to schools focused solely on academic metrics.

Consider how Madison Elementary created community through their "Learning Together" initiative. Once monthly, families gathered for hands-on learning activities that connected to classroom curriculum. During their November session, kindergarten families explored counting and sorting through a gratitude project, while third-grade families investigated local history through community mapping. These events strengthened relationships between families while reinforcing academic concepts.

Effective community-building experiences share several characteristics:

- Activities that connect to classroom learning goals
- Opportunities for families to interact with multiple teachers and staff
- Age-appropriate engagement for siblings and extended family members
- Cultural celebrations that honor the diversity within the school community
- Service projects that benefit the broader neighborhood

When families learn alongside their children and connect with other families, they develop invested relationships in the school community that extend far beyond individual classroom concerns.

4. Develop Student Voice and Leadership Opportunities

Elementary students possess remarkable insights about their school experience, yet their perspectives are often overlooked in community-building efforts. Schools that systematically include student voice in decision-making processes create stronger, more inclusive communities.

At Riverside Elementary, fifth-grade students serve as "Community Ambassadors" who help new families navigate school procedures, lead campus tours, and gather feedback from younger students about school climate. This program increased new family satisfaction scores by 35% while developing leadership skills in upper elementary students.

Student leadership opportunities include:

- Peer mentoring programs pairing older and younger students
- Student-led committees addressing school climate concerns
- Regular student feedback sessions about classroom and school policies
- Student-designed service projects benefiting the local community
- Opportunities for students to share their learning with authentic audiences

When students feel heard and valued as community members, they develop stronger connections to their school and take greater ownership of their learning environment.

5. Foster Collaborative Partnerships with Local Organizations

The strongest school communities extend beyond school walls to include meaningful partnerships with local businesses, community organizations, and cultural institutions. These connections provide authentic learning opportunities while strengthening the school's role within the broader community.

Oakwood Elementary partnered with their local library to create a "Community Readers" program where librarians, business owners, and community leaders regularly visit classrooms to share books and career stories. This initiative exposed students to diverse role models while building lasting relationships between the school and local community members.

Successful community partnerships typically involve:

- Local businesses providing real-world contexts for academic projects
- Community members serving as guest experts and mentors
- Cultural organizations offering authentic learning experiences
- Service partnerships where students contribute to community needs
- Shared resources that benefit both the school and partner organizations

These partnerships demonstrate to students that learning extends beyond school walls while creating networks of support for the entire school community.

Measuring and Sustaining Community Strength

Building a strong school community requires ongoing attention and assessment. The most effective elementary schools regularly gather feedback from students, families, and staff to understand community health and identify areas for improvement.

Simple data collection methods include brief quarterly surveys, focus groups with different family populations, and regular check-ins with community partners. This information helps school leaders adjust strategies and ensure that community-building efforts remain responsive to changing needs.

Successful school communities also celebrate their progress through storytelling, highlighting specific examples of collaboration and connection. When families hear concrete stories about how community involvement benefits their children's learning, they're more likely to continue participating and encourage other families to join.

The evidence is clear: schools that prioritize community building create environments where all students can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. By implementing these five strategies systematically and with attention to local context, elementary schools can develop the strong community connections that support lifelong learning and success.

Remember, building authentic school community takes time and consistent effort. Start with one or two strategies that align with your school's current strengths, gather feedback regularly, and adjust your approach based on what you learn. The investment in community building pays dividends not only in student achievement but in the satisfaction and engagement of everyone who calls your school home.

A Cultural Approach to Education That helped to bring Frederick Public Schools From 'Watch List' to Blue Ribbon

Lance Bohannon, Community Volunteer, Frederick, Oklahoma

In 2015, Frederick Public Schools was on the State Education Department's 'Watch List'. In the next five years, Frederick Elementary would be designated a 'Blue Ribbon' School by the U.S. Department of Education and our test scores would rise to attention-getting levels. Since 2020, our students have tested well above the state average. In 2026, our elementary school is ranked 17th in the state and our middle school is ranked 33rd.

While there were pedagogical improvements, particularly in reading, some of our biggest successes came from looking at the cultural challenges to how our kids are educated. We bought into the complaint that education in America, at all levels, had moved, in various degrees, from coaching how to think to lecturing what to think. In the 60s and 70s, the shift in emphasis from history to social studies worked further to detach young Americans from their identity as Americans. Public education was established early after the nation's founding and a review of the principles that undergirded that establishment proved helpful in guiding our efforts at renewal. Almost all the founders expressed some iteration of the belief that self-government could not exist without the citizenry being both moral and educated. Public education was then established to assure the founding principles of the nation would be safeguarded by a continuous supply of 'good' citizens willing to steward the blessings of those principles, with history being the strongest safeguard against tyranny.

Thomas Jefferson wrote:

. . . it is believed that the most effectual means of preventing this [tyranny] would be, to illuminate, as far as practicable, the minds of the people at large, and more especially to give them knowledge of those facts, which history exhibiteth, that, possessed thereby of the experience of other ages and countries, they may be enabled to know ambition under all its shapes, and prompt to exert their natural powers to defeat its purposes . . .

In 2010, we started to counter this important gap in our kids' education by introducing our scholarship-based Big Topics Initiative.

Big Topics is a weekly lunch discussion group sponsored by the Frederick chapter of Rotary International and designed to help students develop their skills in critical thinking and thought leadership. Our objectives for our students are for them to become intellectually rigorous, mentally nimble, emotionally resilient, and morally sound. Prospective students are nominated by teachers, and then asked to submit a two-page essay stating their reasons for wanting to be accepted into the program. There are separate sessions for high school and for middle school. Frederick Public Schools provides classroom space for a venue, and recognizes Big Topics achievement in the Awards Assembly at the end of the school year.

Each new term/semester (and the summer), we work through one of five on-line courses provided by Hillsdale College in Michigan: Philosophy, Wilfred McClay's Land of Hope, The Constitution, Economics & Art Laffer's Supply-Side Economics, and C.S. Lewis. We also have drawn heavily from Hillsdale's courses on History of Civil Rights in America, Western Theology, and Western Heritage. From time to time, the course work is interrupted by a topic from the current culture the kids want to treat. While many of the shared/exchanged positions are value-based, the students' arguments must be supported by empirical fact. In-depth analysis, research, a rigorous search/respect for truth, classical logic, self-control, and historical context are the primary tools the students use to earn points for their case. Examples of topics we have treated include: American Exceptionalism, Gender Fluidity, Proper Role and Scope of Government, Comparative Cultures, Comparative Economic Systems, Comparative Religions, Values, and Truth.

We continue our middle school initiative (Bomber YELL) in the summer through our structured discussions (three days a week), and coaching in life skills (financial management, auto maintenance, cooking, sewing, etc.).

While students earn points primarily for advancing our weekly discussions, additional points may be earned for independent research and write-ups, and for acts of good citizenship in the community (community clean-up, park maintenance, blood donation, volunteering for community events, etc.).

At the end of the school year, scholarships are awarded to students based on their level of participation which is indicated by accumulated earned points. Big Topics is 100% privately funded and operates under the tax-deductible umbrella of Big Topics, a non-profit corporation. We are proud of the fact that in the seventeen years we have been in operation, we have collected and distributed $170,000 in scholarship funds.

In 2018, Big Topics was designated an "Outstanding Mentoring Program" in the state by the Oklahoma Foundation for Excellence. Starting in 2020, Oklahoma State University has used Big Topics as a model for community initiative in its five-year Rural Renewal Project. In the spring of 2024, Hillsdale College included Big Topics in its Update publication, describing our creative use of its online courses. And most recently, one of our long-time donors has established an endowment fund to assure Big Topics continues in Frederick Public Schools into the future. A new initiative forming a Big Topics alumni group is under-way to provide ongoing leadership for both content and facilitation.

Inspire to Teach

Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education

Introduction

Recent national estimates report over 400,000 teaching positions across the United States were either unfilled or filled by individuals without the certification for their hired position. Oklahoma has not been immune to this issue and has faced persistent teacher shortages for more than a decade. Rural districts, high-poverty schools, and specialized subject areas such as mathematics, science, and special education have been particularly affected. In response to these challenges, state leaders have pursued various recruitment and retention initiatives designed to strengthen the educator workforce. One of the most significant recent efforts is the Inspired to Teach Program, officially known as the Oklahoma Future Teacher Scholarship and Employment Incentive Program.

Created in 2022, Inspired to Teach has become a central component of Oklahoma's strategy to recruit future educators, reduce financial barriers to teacher preparation, and encourage graduates to remain in Oklahoma classrooms. The program combines scholarships for undergraduate education majors with employment incentives for graduates who teach in Oklahoma public schools, creating a pathway that supports aspiring teachers from college enrollment through their early years in the profession. Combining this program with additional aid from the student's college or university and federal aid significantly reduces the cost of the degree, consistently resulting in a student graduating with zero debt.

Creation

The Inspired to Teach Program was established during the 2022 Oklahoma legislative session through House Bill 3564, authored by Representative Mark McBride and Senator Dewayne Pemberton. The legislation directed the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education (OSRHE) to create and administer a scholarship and employment incentive program designed to strengthen the state's teacher pipeline. Representative Mark McBride commented upon the inception of the program, "Oklahoma had been experiencing a teacher shortage for some time, and we needed to address the problem. We sat down with educators, the State Regents, and others to determine how we could help to drive more students towards enrollment in teacher preparatory programs. We wanted high school students to be encouraged to pursue this career. Get significant financial support for your degree and stay in Oklahoma to teach."

With legislative leadership and educators tackling the issue of a teacher shortage, momentum emerged to create a robust recruitment and retention program which was comprehensive at the state level. School districts throughout the state reported difficulties filling vacancies, leading to increased reliance on emergency-certified teachers and long-term substitutes.

The legislation reflected two primary goals. First, it sought to encourage more students to enroll in teacher preparation programs. Second, it aimed to increase the number of graduates who remained in Oklahoma public schools after earning their teaching credentials. By linking financial assistance to a commitment to teaching in Oklahoma, lawmakers hoped to address both recruitment and retention challenges simultaneously.

Administrative rules adopted by the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education reinforced the program's purpose as supporting the teacher pipeline and preparing public school teachers for pre-kindergarten through 12th grade while incentivizing graduates to teach in Oklahoma public schools for at least five consecutive years.

Program Details and Eligibility Requirements

Unlike traditional scholarships that only assist students while they are enrolled in college, Inspired to Teach provides support both during preparation and after graduates enter the workforce.

Eligible participants can receive:

- $1,000 annually during each of their first three years in an approved educator preparation program.
- $2,500 during their final year of study.
- $4,000 annually for up to five years after graduation while teaching in an Oklahoma public school.

The total value of the program can reach $25,500 over the course of participation.

This structure reflects a deliberate policy choice. Rather than focusing solely on reducing college costs, the program also provides financial incentives during the critical first years of teaching, a period in which many new educators leave the profession. By spreading program benefits across both college enrollment and early employment, state leaders hoped to improve long-term retention.

The program is open to Oklahoma students pursuing teaching degrees at accredited institutions within the state.

To qualify, students must:

- Graduate from high school, complete a homeschool program, or earn a GED.
- Meet admission standards at an approved Oklahoma college or university.
- Declare a major in an approved teacher education program leading to standard teacher certification.
- Maintain full-time enrollment status.
- Maintain satisfactory academic progress and at least

a 2.5 grade point average.

- Agree to complete a teacher preparation program and teach in an Oklahoma public school for at least five consecutive years after graduation and certification.

The program also extends to students attending community colleges that have approved articulation agreements with accredited teacher education programs at Oklahoma universities. This feature broadens access for students who begin their higher education journey at two-year institutions.

Statewide Impact and Adoption

Following its launch, Inspired to Teach was rapidly adopted by colleges and universities across Oklahoma. Public universities, regional universities, community colleges, and several private institutions joined the initiative.

The widespread adoption reflects a shared recognition among higher education leaders that teacher shortages require coordinated statewide action. Institutions have increasingly incorporated Inspired to Teach into their recruitment strategies, often pairing the program with institutional scholarships and other teacher-support initiatives.

For example, several universities allow students to combine Inspired to Teach benefits with federal TEACH Grants, institutional scholarships, and other financial aid programs. This layered approach can significantly reduce the cost of earning a teaching degree.

Initial Results and Impact

Since its implementation, participation in Inspired to Teach has grown significantly, reflecting continued interest in Oklahoma's teacher preparation pipeline. As of June 1, 2026, the program had 7,949 participants enrolled, up from 6,624 in 2024-25 and 2,131 in its first year. During 2025-26 alone, the program added 1,430 new participants, a 21% increase over the prior year. To date, Inspired to Teach has awarded more than $15 million in scholarships and more than $4 million in employment incentives for participant-teachers who have entered Oklahoma public school classrooms.

The program's recent data suggest that Inspired to Teach is reaching students early in their college careers and helping strengthen Oklahoma's educator pipeline. For the second consecutive year, freshmen made up the largest share of applicants, accounting for 32% of participants. The program has also seen growth in key shortage areas, including mathematics and science education. In 2025-26, 483 participants were enrolled in math or science education majors, including 195 mathematics education majors, representing another 46% increase in mathematics education participation. Special Education also remains a notable area of participation, with 234 majors currently enrolled.

Inspired to Teach is also helping attract and retain future teachers from outside Oklahoma. While most participants are Oklahoma residents, 667 out-of-state students have enrolled in the program and committed to teaching in Oklahoma public schools for five years after graduation, including 411 students from Texas. In addition, employment incentives for 731 recipients have been initiated or paid to date, totaling $4,016,000, as program participants begin moving from teacher preparation programs into Oklahoma classrooms.

Supporters point to these outcomes as evidence that strategic financial incentives can help reverse declines in teacher preparation enrollment and support long-term workforce needs. At a time when many states continue to face teacher shortages, Inspired to Teach is showing measurable progress in rebuilding Oklahoma's educator pipeline by encouraging students to enter teacher education programs, complete their degrees and remain in Oklahoma as public school teachers.

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Future of the Program and Challenges

Although Inspired to Teach has received widespread support, questions remain regarding its long-term impact. One challenge involves measuring whether participants ultimately complete their degrees and fulfill the five-year teaching commitment. Because the program is relatively new, comprehensive data on long-term retention outcomes are still developing.

Another consideration is funding stability. State law specifies that the program operates as funding is available through legislative appropriations. Continued growth may require additional funding to support increasing numbers of participants.

Critics of teacher recruitment initiatives often note that financial incentives alone cannot solve all workforce challenges. Issues such as teacher compensation, classroom conditions, workload, and professional support also influence recruitment and retention. As a result, many education advocates view Inspired to Teach as one component of a broader strategy rather than a standalone solution.

Conclusion

The Inspired to Teach program has been widely recognized as a meaningful investment in Oklahoma's future educator workforce. Participation has expanded rapidly across the state's higher education system, and early indicators suggest the initiative has contributed to increased interest in teacher education.

As Oklahoma continues to address educator shortages, Inspired to Teach stands as a notable example of how state policymakers, higher education institutions, and school leaders can collaborate to strengthen the teacher pipeline. Representative Mark McBride describes this overall work as the "most meaningful piece of legislation I was a part of for the State of Oklahoma. I am proud of the program, the commitment of educators, the State Regents, and the legislature to continue to make this investment in students and the program.

While long-term outcomes will become clearer over time, the program is already established as a cornerstone of Oklahoma's strategy for recruiting and retaining the next generation of educators.

WATCH D.O.G.S.: Engaging Fathers to Strengthen Schools and Student Success

Summary of Watch D.O.G.S. by Oklahoma Academy Research Committee

Across Oklahoma, schools continue to explore strategies that improve student achievement while creating safer, more supportive learning environments. One approach that has gained traction is increasing meaningful family engagement, particularly the involvement of fathers and father figures. The WATCH D.O.G.S. (Dads of Great Students) program provides a structured model for schools to engage male volunteers in ways that support students, teachers, and school administrators.

Nearly 100 Oklahoma schools currently participate in WATCH D.O.G.S., making Oklahoma one of many states utilizing the nationally recognized program. Since its inception, the initiative has demonstrated that family engagement extends beyond parent teacher conferences and school events. By creating opportunities for fathers and father figures to become visible participants in the school day, the program seeks to strengthen relationships, improve school climate, and reinforce the importance of education.

Origins of the Program

WATCH D.O.G.S. was established in 1998 at a single elementary school in Springdale, Arkansas. Developed by the National Center for Fathering, the program began as a response to concerns about school safety and the limited involvement of fathers in K-12 education. What started as a local initiative has expanded significantly.

Today, more than 8,800 schools in 49 states and the District of Columbia have launched a WATCH D.O.G.S. program of their own. The program has also expanded internationally to schools in Canada, Mexico, China, Puerto Rico, and Barbados. Collectively, participating schools have benefited from millions of volunteer hours provided by fathers and father figures.

Program Goals

The program is built around two primary objectives:

- Provide students with positive male role models who demonstrate that education is important.
- Enhance school safety by providing additional adult supervision throughout the school building while helping reduce bullying and other negative behaviors.

Rather than replacing teachers or school personnel, volunteers supplement existing staff by serving in supportive roles throughout the school day.

How the Program Operates

WATCH D.O.G.S. is available to schools serving students from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Fathers, grandfathers, uncles, stepfathers, and other positive male role models volunteer for at least one full day during the school year.

Most schools begin each year with a kickoff event such as a "Dads and Kids Pizza Night" or "Donuts with Dad," where volunteers learn about the program and sign up for participation. A volunteer coordinator, commonly referred to as the "Top Dog," works with the school administration to schedule volunteers and identify areas where assistance is needed.

During their volunteer day, participants typically:

- Welcome students and monitor school entrances.
- Assist with student arrival and dismissal.
- Help supervise hallways, cafeterias, playgrounds, and common areas.
- Read with students or assist teachers with small group instruction.
- Work with students on flashcards, homework, spelling, or other classroom activities under teacher supervision.
- Serve as positive role models for all students, not just their own children.

Volunteers wear an official WATCH D.O.G.S. shirt and identification badge so students and staff can easily recognize them throughout the school.

Supporting School Climate

Although WATCH D.O.G.S. was originally created in part

to enhance school safety, many schools report that one of its greatest benefits is the positive influence adult male volunteers have on school culture.

Principals participating in the program have frequently reported reductions in bullying incidents during volunteer days. The visible presence of caring adults throughout the building can serve as a deterrent to inappropriate behavior while increasing students' sense of safety and belonging.

The program also provides teachers with additional classroom support at a time when many schools face increasing class sizes and limited staffing resources. Volunteers allow teachers to spend more individualized time with students while providing another trusted adult who can encourage and support learning.

Increasing Family Engagement

Research has consistently demonstrated that parental involvement contributes to improved educational outcomes. WATCH D.O.G.S. focuses specifically on increasing father engagement, an area many schools have historically found challenging.

A national survey conducted among participating schools found:

- Eighty-nine percent of responding schools agreed that WATCH D.O.G.S. is a valuable component of creating a safe and positive learning environment.
- Seventy-nine percent reported increased father involvement in other school activities, including parent teacher conferences, classroom volunteering, and parent organizations, after implementing the program.

For participating fathers and father figures, spending an entire school day alongside students offers firsthand insight into classroom expectations, instructional methods, and the social challenges students experience. Many participants report stronger relationships with their children and greater confidence in supporting academic success at home.

Benefits for Students

Schools participating in WATCH D.O.G.S. identify several potential benefits for students, including:

- Increased exposure to positive adult male role models.
- Greater encouragement and reinforcement of educational achievement.
- Improved student confidence and self esteem.
- Additional individualized attention during classroom activities.
- Enhanced feelings of safety and school connectedness.

The program recognizes that not every student has consistent access to positive male role models outside of school. By engaging fathers and other trusted adults, schools create opportunities for students to observe constructive adult relationships and positive community involvement.

National Recognition

Over the past two decades, WATCH D.O.G.S. has received national recognition from educators, policymakers, and family engagement organizations.

The program has been featured on NBC's Today, NBC Nightly News, ABC World News Tonight, National Public Radio, the BBC, and numerous local news outlets across the country.

Federal education leaders have also highlighted the initiative. In 2011, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan visited a WATCH D.O.G.S. school to encourage increased father involvement in education. Earlier, the program participated in the White House Conference on Safe Schools, where then-U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings described the model as simple enough to be implemented in schools of every size and community type.

WATCH D.O.G.S. has also been recognized by the U.S. Department of Education, the National PTA, the President's Advisory Council on Fatherhood, and researchers at the Johns Hopkins University Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships as an effective example of family and community engagement.

Considerations for Oklahoma

As Oklahoma seeks to improve student learning outcomes, strengthen school culture, and increase community involvement, programs such as WATCH D.O.G.S. illustrate one approach for expanding partnerships between schools and families. While the program does not address instructional quality or curriculum directly, it demonstrates how community volunteers can support schools by improving student engagement, reinforcing positive behavior, and strengthening connections between families and educators.

For communities examining strategies to improve educational outcomes, WATCH D.O.G.S. offers an example of how structured volunteerism can contribute to safer schools, increased parental involvement, and stronger relationships that support student success both inside and outside the classroom.

Oklahoma schools hope to boost safety with expanded state plan

Jessie Christopher Smith, The Oklahoman, June 24, 2026

Oklahoma school leaders and public safety officials announced an expanding partnership meant to protect against school shootings.

The Oklahoma School Security Institute, or OSSI, which is part of the Oklahoma Department of Public Safety, is leading efforts to support schools with prevention-based safety standards statewide. The division will conduct school safety trainings and security assessments on behalf of the Oklahoma State Department of Education.

As part of the agreement signed on Wednesday, June 24, OSSI will help identify security gaps on school campuses and recommend improvements for preparations and response capabilities. OSSI will also provide behavioral threat assessment and management training for both law enforcement and school officials, with the goal of identifying concerning behaviors early and intervening to stop violence before it happens.

The collaboration between public safety and school officials allows for further expansion of active-shooter training courses for law enforcement and school employees.

At a news conference about the partnership, Oklahoma Superintendent of Public Instruction Lindel Fields touted the collaboration as a way of providing practical tools to help prevent emergencies.

"Safe schools are the foundation of student success," Fields said. "School safety is not separate from education — it is essential to education, and collaboration keeps students safer. This partnership allows us to leverage the expertise of OSSI and provide schools with training, assessment and resources statewide and bring consistency to Oklahoma school communities."

"Prevention is the most important thing," the superintendent continued. "On the heels of a school shooting, I think we can all understand the importance of having experts do what they do best."

Fields was referencing an April shooting at Pauls Valley High School, where the principal was shot as he tackled and subdued a lone gunman moments after he entered the school. The principal, Kirk Moore, survived and has been hailed as a hero for preventing further harm.

Police officers also arrived and entered the school within minutes of the first 911 call.

Oklahoma Public Safety Commissioner Tim Tipton said the security training partnership was "the next step" in a more consolidated effort to secure professional safety standards for schools statewide.

"To date, we've trained about 6,000 teachers and staff in Run-Hide-Fight," Tipton said. "We've got thousands more that we need to train, so this is going to help expedite that training."

The quick end to the Pauls Valley shooting contrasted with the infamous response to a 2022 mass shooting at Robb Elementary in Uvalde, Texas, where two teachers and 19 students were killed. It took more than an hour for around 400 law enforcement officers to breach a classroom.

OSSI Director Mike Fike said state leaders did not want something like what occurred in Uvalde, Texas, to happen in Oklahoma, so the partnership between Oklahoma schools and the state's public safety department became more heavily prioritized following Gov. Stitt's "Secure Oklahoma Schools" executive order.

"There had been some limited training going on already, but we came in with a holistic plan that the commissioner had already put together," Fike said. "Our plan focused in on three areas: response, prevention, and recovery. Our goal is to have every officer in the state trained the same way, so that when they get there, they don't have to make a plan — they already have a plan, because time is of the essence."

OSSI is providing its School Resource Officer Academy, a 40-hour program offering relationship-building and scenario-based training for police officers assigned to specific schools. OSSI leaders argue that a school resource officer should be assigned to every school district in Oklahoma.

Stephanie Prince, a regional coordinator for OSSI, said the school resource officers form a bond with students that can positively affect young people and prevent violence.

"That school resource officer, a lot of times, is the face they go to, is the person they go to, when they are having any type of issues at home or at school, and that officer can be a wealth of information on, how can we help this student?"

OSSI also recommends that citizens submit safety concerns for evaluation directly to the state's school safety network through the free ProtectOK mobile app.

It's no longer 'college vs. trade.' Both are critical to Oklahoma's future

K. John Lee, The Oklahoman, October 28, 2025

I miss … correction … I love "Dirty Jobs," the show hosted by pro-work TV personality Mike Rowe. Today, Rowe remains a champion of skilled labor. He's even served as a spokesperson for the Oklahoma Energy Resources Board. Welcome to Oklahoma, Mike!

For too long, society has pushed a single narrative: that a college degree leading to a career in high-tech, investment banking, law or medicine is the gold standard of success. That story is flawed because it ignores the skills and ambitions of many young men.

The shift is clear: America is rediscovering that there's more than one honorable career path. Vocational and trade schools are making a major comeback, while universities continue to prepare the professionals who anchor our communities.

It's not "college vs. trade." It's both.

According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center's Spring 2025 report, enrollment at public two-year institutions with a vocational focus has grown almost 20% since spring 2020, now reaching about 871,000 students nationwide. Young people, especially young men, are searching for different and smarter paths.

The demand for skilled workers is sky-high and pay scales are strong. Trade programs cost a fraction of a four-year degree, often allowing students to graduate debt-free and enter the workforce quickly. That means earlier opportunities for homeownership, entrepreneurship and financial independence.

But let's not forget: College has its own return on investment. Doctors, engineers, teachers, accountants, nurses and scientists all come from lecture halls, and we need them as much as ever. While university graduates may carry heavier student loans, their credentials often open doors to broader career mobility and leadership roles.

Here in Oklahoma, we see both paths at work every day. Graduates of the University of Oklahoma and Oklahoma State University fill our hospitals, classrooms and engineering firms. At the same time, Tulsa Tech, Oklahoma CareerTech and community colleges are training welders, linemen and HVAC techs who keep neighborhoods running. Both sets of graduates are critical to our state's future.

The truth is, both systems create value. Some young people thrive when their education is hands-on and tied directly to their craft. Others are better suited for a longer academic grind that produces surgeons and software developers. Both require discipline, sacrifice and resilience.

Rowe tells the story of how his high school guidance counselor displayed a poster of a smiling college graduate in a coat and tie beside a weary tradesman. The caption read: "Work Smarter, Not Harder."

What an insult to those who literally built this country. And what a slight to those who heal it, teach it and innovate within it.

Think about it this way: The surgeon performing heart surgery can't work without the electricity the lineman keeps on. The teacher shaping young minds relies on the maintenance and cafeteria workers to keep school open. Every profession leans on another. That's societal teamwork.

Perhaps the better slogan is this: Hard work is smart.

Whether it's a steelworker tightening bolts on a bridge or a physician diagnosing a heart condition, real work builds dignity, restores pride and offers purpose. One keeps the lights on, the other keeps the patient alive. Neither can succeed without the other.

Success isn't defined by the degree on your wall but by the effort in your hands and mind. College remains the right choice for many. Trade school is just as honorable for others. And for a generation of young men looking for direction, there's nothing smarter than recognizing that hard work — in any uniform — is honorable.

After 38 years in Los Angeles, K. John Lee recently boomeranged back to his Oklahoma roots. He is a financier, real estate investor, former high school teacher and a father of two young men.

Assessing Career Decision-Making Interventions: Effects of Career Courses and Group Counseling on High School Students

Hang Zeng and Congfen Ma, K20 Center Research, 2025

Introduction

This intervention brief explores the findings of the research article titled "Assessing Career Decision-Making Interventions: Effects of Career Courses and Group Counseling on High School Students" by Hang Zeng and Congfen Ma published in 2025. The study investigates the impact of career courses and group counseling on career decision-making self-efficacy and difficulties among Chinese high school students. The authors highlight the importance of career decision-making in shaping students' academic and professional trajectories, particularly in the context of China's rapidly evolving labor market and educational reforms. The study aims to address gaps in career education programs and provide insights into effective interventions for supporting career decision-making.

Methodology

Research Design:
The study employs a pre-posttest design to evaluate the effects of career courses and group counseling on career decision-making self-efficacy and difficulties. Two separate studies were conducted.

Sample:
Study 1 - The sample consisted of 308 first-year high school students (approximately 16 years old) from an urban high school in Guangdong Province, China. The sample included 155 adolescent women and 153 adolescent men.

Study 2 - The sample consisted of 40 first-year high school students from the same region, divided into an experimental group (20 students) and a control group (20 students). The experimental group received both career courses and group counseling, while the control group received only career courses.

Data Analysis:
The study used MANOVA and mixed-design ANOVAs to analyze the effects of the interventions on career decision-making self-efficacy and difficulties. The analyses included checks for normality, homogeneity of variance, and sphericity.

Results

Study 1:
Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy: The career course significantly increased self-efficacy among participants. Adolescent men reported higher self-efficacy than adolescent women both before and after the intervention.

Career Decision-Making Difficulties: The career course did not significantly reduce decision-making difficulties overall. However, gender differences were observed: adolescent men reported increased difficulties and adolescent women showed a decreasing trend.

Study 2:
Combined Intervention: The combined intervention of career courses and group counseling significantly reduced career decision-making difficulties for both genders. The experimental group showed a significant decrease in difficulties, but the control group did not show any significant change.

These findings suggest that career courses effectively boost self-efficacy, but adding group counseling helps address practical and emotional challenges in career decision-making.

Application into Practice

To replicate this intervention in a school context, educators and administrators should focus on the following components:

- **Career Courses:** Implement structured career education courses that cover self-assessment, exploration of career options, decision-making skills, and planning for future career paths. Ensure that these courses are delivered by experienced instructors.
- **Group Counseling:** Supplement career courses with group counseling sessions that emphasize interactive and experiential learning. These sessions should provide emotional support, enhance self-awareness, and foster practical problem-solving skills in a collaborative setting.
- **Gender-Responsive Strategies:** Develop tailored interventions that consider the distinct challenges faced by adolescent men and women. This includes addressing emotional and self-esteem issues for adolescent women and focusing on skill development and goal setting for adolescent men.
- **Comprehensive Support**: Create a flexible approach that combines career courses and group counseling to provide both foundational knowledge and practical skills. This ensures that interventions are responsive to the varying needs of students.

By implementing these components, schools can effectively support students' career decision-making processes, helping them navigate academic and professional trajectories with confidence and reduced difficulties.

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Should Schools Teach Common Life Skills? Academic Excellence vs. Real-World Readiness

4.0 Schools, July 24, 2025

With only 48% of U.S. adults demonstrating basic financial literacy and 88% of Americans reporting they didn't feel prepared to manage money after high school graduation, the stakes extend far beyond individual success to national economic stability and social well-being.

This question highlights one of education's most fundamental questions: Should schools teach common life skills?

There are two competing visions of education's purpose: preparing students for standardized tests and college admission versus equipping them with practical competencies for navigating adult life. It raises questions about curriculum priorities, parental versus institutional responsibility, and whether schools can effectively balance academic rigor with real-world readiness.

The Case FOR Schools Teaching Common Life Skills

Advocates argue that integrating life skills education isn't just beneficial — it's essential for student success, economic stability, and addressing a national crisis in practical competency that traditional academic subjects alone cannot solve.

The Academic Performance Connection

Contrary to concerns that life skills education detracts from academic achievement, research consistently demonstrates the opposite. Students with stronger social-emotional competencies — a core component of life skills — show significantly better academic performance across all subject areas.

The data is compelling. School-based Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) interventions have produced an 11 percentile increase in students' overall grades and improved attendance rates. More remarkably, these academic benefits persist long-term, with students' academic performance averaging 13 percentile points higher years after participation compared to those who didn't engage in such programs.

The mechanism behind this improvement is straightforward: students who possess strong emotional regulation, effective communication, and critical thinking abilities are better positioned to engage with academic content, manage stress, persist through challenges, and collaborate effectively. Rather than competing with academic learning, life skills serve as enablers of academic success.

Students with higher emotional intelligence tend to be more engaged in their learning, display improved classroom behavior, and achieve higher grades. This connection suggests that emotional and social competencies aren't peripheral to academic learning but foundational to it.

Beyond core academics, extracurricular activities that foster life skills demonstrate measurable benefits. Competitive speech and debate programs, which enhance critical thinking, student confidence, and research and writing skills, have been linked to improved graduation rates, increased college enrollment and success, and decreased dropout rates.

This evidence reframes the concern about time diverted from academics, suggesting that life skills investment functions as a multiplier for academic achievement rather than a detraction from it.

Addressing the Mental Health Crisis

American students face unprecedented mental health challenges that traditional academic instruction cannot address. Life skills education provides crucial protective behaviors and beliefs — including emotion regulation, self-efficacy, and relationship-building — that actively mitigate mental health challenges.

The National PTA emphasizes that prioritizing youth mental health helps young people "learn critical life skills for handling stress, adapting and growing through challenges, building meaningful relationships, and making healthy life choices." This preventative approach suggests that equipping students with emotional and social tools early can reduce the need for more intensive mental health interventions later.

Participation in life skills programs consistently correlates with reduced emotional distress, more positive attitudes about oneself and others, and fewer externalizing behaviors and discipline problems. School administrators report decreases in bullying and disciplinary issues, while students describe calmer, more connected school environments following program implementation.

Research indicates that self-awareness and emotion regulation can protect against suicidal ideation — a critical concern given rising youth suicide rates. By teaching these skills systematically, schools can provide students with essential tools for navigating adolescent and adult challenges that academic subjects alone cannot address.

The broader school climate benefits are significant. Emotional intelligence and social competency enable students to navigate stressful situations and maintain healthy relationships, contributing to more positive and supportive learning environments for all students.

The Financial Literacy Emergency

Perhaps nowhere is the need for life skills education more

urgent than in financial literacy, where American students face a genuine crisis that has far-reaching economic consequences.

The statistics are alarming. The average financial literacy rate among U.S. adults stands at just 48%, with Generation Z exhibiting the lowest rate of any generation. This lack of knowledge has tangible consequences: in 2022, the average loss per person due to inadequate financial education totaled $1,819.

The scale of the problem becomes clear when examining public sentiment. A striking 80% of Americans believe they would have been better off if they had learned more about personal finance in high school, while 88% reported not feeling fully prepared to manage money upon graduation. Among teens currently in school, 73% want to learn more about personal finance.

This widespread demand for financial education reflects a clear educational gap with serious consequences. Young adults who lack financial literacy are more vulnerable to predatory lending, credit card debt, poor investment decisions, and long-term financial instability that can affect their ability to buy homes, start families, or save for retirement.

Despite overwhelming public support for financial education — with 75.8% of Americans supporting policies mandating financial education in schools and 87% of consumers agreeing that financial concepts should be taught in high school — only 35 states require students to take a personal finance course to graduate as of 2024. Even more concerning, only 10 of 27 states with mandates have fully implemented them.

This disparity contributes to inconsistent financial literacy levels and reinforces socioeconomic divides, as students from wealthy families may receive financial education at home while those from lower-income backgrounds remain unprepared for financial decision-making.

Measurable Career and Life Readiness Benefits

Modern employers increasingly seek candidates with "soft skills" that extend far beyond technical knowledge, making life skills education directly relevant to career success and economic mobility.

An assessment by the NYC Department of Education revealed that 82% of students felt better prepared for job interviews after participating in life skills programs, while 75% reported increased understanding of personal finance and budgeting. These concrete, measurable improvements demonstrate that life skills education provides tangible benefits for immediate post-graduation challenges.

Programs like 4-H have shown significant impact on self-confidence and maturity, promoting leadership, communication, and decision-making skills that lead to higher success rates in college. Students who develop strong social and emotional skills show higher rates of high school graduation, postsecondary enrollment and completion, and stable employment.

The skills employers most value — communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, time management, adaptability, and resilience — are core components of comprehensive life skills curricula. By teaching these competencies systematically, schools can better prepare students for workforce demands that traditional academic subjects may not adequately address.

Beyond individual benefits, the economic impact is substantial. Analyses of evidence-based social-emotional learning programs estimate an $11 return for every dollar invested, stemming from improved academic outcomes, reduced crime, and enhanced lifetime earnings. This economic perspective underscores the long-term societal value of investing in students' practical and emotional development.

Broad Public and Expert Support

The call for life skills education comes from diverse stakeholders who recognize gaps in traditional academic preparation and advocate for more comprehensive student development.

Prominent educators and child development specialists champion this integration. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines SEL as integral to education and human development, helping young people "thrive personally and academically, develop and maintain positive relationships, become lifelong learners, and contribute to a more caring, just world."

CASEL emphasizes that SEL serves as a "foundation for many of our most pressing priorities," including academic success, fulfilling careers, healthy relationships, and responsible civic engagement. The American Federation of Teachers advocates for a "rich, well-rounded curriculum" that includes social and emotional capacity, recognizing that students need diverse skills to lead "successful, meaningful lives."

Public opinion overwhelmingly supports this direction. The National Financial Educators Council found that over 83% of people across the U.S. believe financial literacy should be taught in high schools, with NFEC CEO Vince Shorb noting that "people overwhelmingly support implementing policies that mandate financial education in schools."

This broad consensus reflects recognition that traditional academic curricula alone may not sufficiently prepare students for modern life's complexities. Many educators observe that "academic performance alone does not measure their students' ability to succeed in adult life," expressing concern that students might graduate with excellent scores "but not knowing the first thing about coping with reality."

The philosophical foundation for this approach traces back to educational pioneers. Franklin D. Roosevelt's observa-

tion that "we may not be able to prepare the future for our children, but we can at least prepare our children for the future" captures the essential argument for equipping students with practical life skills alongside academic knowledge.

The Case AGAINST Schools Teaching Common Life Skills

Despite compelling arguments for life skills education, significant concerns exist about curriculum overload, implementation challenges, parental responsibility, and the potential dilution of academic rigor that defines educational excellence.

Curriculum Overload and Academic Dilution

The most fundamental concern about adding life skills to school curricula centers on the reality that educational time and resources are finite. The existing K-12 curriculum is already "packed with too much content, leaving little room for in-depth learning, critical thinking, and creativity."

Teachers frequently report insufficient time to fully implement existing curriculum subjects or address all objectives within them, noting the difficulty of planning for extensive material in short timeframes. This feeling of being overwhelmed by documentation and external expectations is common among educators who struggle to balance competing demands within traditional school schedules.

When important subjects compete for limited instructional time, there's significant risk that "the basics" — reading, writing, and mathematics — may suffer as time gets diverted to other subjects. This can lead to superficial coverage of topics rather than the deep learning necessary for genuine competency development.

The academic consequences are measurable. When students experience curriculum overload, they become disengaged and demotivated, leading to superficial learning where they struggle to retain information or apply it practically. Studies indicate that students experiencing curriculum overload are more likely to perform poorly on assessments and report increased stress and anxiety about schoolwork.

The opportunity cost consideration is significant. Time, resources, and focus diverted to life skills education represents time not spent on core academic subjects that form the foundation for higher education and technical careers. Some argue that requiring students to take courses they have little interest in, or that are taught ineffectively, represents a high cost in terms of student engagement and learning.

The National Center for Education Statistics continues to focus on collecting and analyzing data about achievement in core academic subjects like reading and mathematics, implying continued emphasis on these foundational areas as primary measures of educational success.

Critics argue that schools should prioritize academic rigor to ensure students are prepared for college-level work, particularly given that many students arrive at higher education with deficiencies in basic reading and writing skills. The pressure to cover extensive subject matter can prioritize breadth over depth, potentially hindering the development of critical academic competencies.

Implementation Challenges and Resource Constraints

Even with good intentions, implementing comprehensive life skills education across diverse school systems presents overwhelming practical challenges that may undermine program effectiveness and strain already stretched educational resources.

Teacher training represents a critical bottleneck. Many programs provide inadequate preparation — some training sessions last only two days, deemed insufficient for developing deep understanding of content or empowering teachers to confidently address sensitive topics. This limited preparation undermines teachers' professional responsibility to become experts in subjects they teach.

The burden of training often falls on school principals who may not be subject specialists and are already managing high-pressure roles. Furthermore, the language used in teacher guides can be inaccessible, leading teachers to omit curriculum areas they struggle to comprehend or teach effectively.

Resource limitations compound these challenges. Teachers report that current textbooks are often inadequate for supporting life skills integration, with expressed needs for professional development workshops and "resource banks of life skills activities for each subject." The means of assessing progress in teaching these skills are also lacking, making it difficult to measure effectiveness and provide targeted support.

Increased class sizes and limited textbook support further constrain implementation efficiency. For special education, educators face additional challenges connecting individualized education program (IEP) goals with broader curriculum content, often wishing for more preparation time to meet diverse student needs.

Current working conditions, including low teacher salaries, can affect educators' motivation to prioritize subjects perceived as less critical than core academics. These practical constraints suggest that even with best intentions, successful widespread integration of life skills requires significant systemic investment in teacher capacity and resources that many districts cannot provide.

Parental Responsibility and Values Conflicts

A significant perspective argues that primary responsibility for teaching life skills rests with parents, not schools, based on the belief that families are uniquely positioned to provide foundational guidance during children's formative years.

Parents can offer personalized learning experiences for practical life skills through engaging children in household chores and providing hands-on experience with cooking, budgeting, and time management. This practical, consistent, role-modeled instruction at home is considered vital for developing communication skills, problem-solving abilities, and emotional regulation within family contexts.

Historically, parents held "absolute authority over the education of their child" at common law, and while states now have legitimate interests in education for citizenship, parental rights to control children's upbringing remain well-established. Some argue that schools should focus on "baseline knowledge" and teaching students "how to teach themselves" rather than attempting to cover all "life lessons."

Critics sometimes point out that students might not pay attention to life skills lessons in classroom settings anyway, suggesting that formal school environments aren't conducive to this type of learning. This view emphasizes that certain skills are best acquired through direct experience, mentorship, and self-directed learning within family contexts rather than through standardized curricula.

Values conflicts represent another significant concern. Conservative education reform groups argue that certain life skills curricula can be "co-opted by political agendas." Organizations like Moms for Liberty view social-emotional learning as a "bait and switch" designed to instill "the government's value system" into children, potentially conflicting with parental beliefs on sensitive subjects.

Parents send children to school with their own value systems, and many believe schools should not become platforms for personal or political expression that might contradict family teachings. This concern extends to curricula that might address topics like emotional regulation, relationship skills, or decision-making in ways that conflict with religious or cultural family values.

Ideological Concerns and Academic Mission Dilution
Beyond practical implementation challenges, significant concerns exist about the potential for life skills education to compromise schools' traditional academic mission and introduce ideologically influenced content.

The Heritage Foundation argues that while education reformers have focused on school choice, attention must also be paid to curriculum content, noting that an "incoherent skills-driven vision of curricula" has dominated American education. They contend that the "conservative project for school curriculum extends from the founding purpose of public education: preparing each generation of children for engaged and responsible citizenship," implying focus on traditional civic and academic knowledge over broader life skills.

The National Association of Scholars criticizes curricula that combine "misguided pedagogical theory, low academic standards, and politicized instruction," advocating for return to rigorous core academic subjects like mathematics and science. They believe educational system quality is directly linked to educator quality and academic content rigor.

Some critics argue that schools, by focusing on broad ranges of life skills, may inadvertently produce "dependent personalities" or "inadequate people" by fostering systems that discourage independent thought and critical questioning of established norms. This perspective suggests that traditional academic models focused on knowledge acquisition and intellectual discipline are more effective in cultivating truly independent and capable individuals.

The concern extends to assessment and accountability. If schools spend significant time on life skills that are difficult to measure objectively, there's risk of "checking boxes" rather than ensuring deep learning. This could lead to programs that look good on paper but fail to provide meaningful skill development.

The opportunity cost argument remains central: diverting resources from core academic subjects means less time for foundational knowledge that students need for competitive college admission and career preparation. Critics worry that overemphasis on "soft skills" might dilute academic mission, leading to less rigorous education that ultimately disadvantages students in competitive global environments.

Balancing Academic Excellence with Life Readiness

The debate over whether schools should teach common life skills reveals a fundamental tension in American education between traditional academic excellence and comprehensive student development. Both sides present compelling evidence that demands serious consideration.

The case for life skills education is supported by substantial data showing academic benefits, mental health improvements, and critical gaps in student preparation for adult life. With only 48% of adults demonstrating basic financial literacy and $1,819 average annual losses due to financial ignorance, the practical consequences of neglecting these skills are measurable and severe. The 11–13 percentile point improvements in academic performance associated with SEL programs demonstrate that life skills can enhance rather than detract from traditional learning.

However, critics raise valid concerns about curriculum overload, implementation challenges, and the fundamental question of educational mission. Teachers already struggle with packed curricula and limited resources, while parents maintain legitimate interests in controlling their children's value formation and practical skill development. The risk of superficial coverage and ideological influence cannot be dismissed.

Finding Common Ground

The most productive path forward likely involves recognizing that this isn't a binary choice between academic rigor

and life skills, but rather a challenge of thoughtful integration and clear role definition.

Academic Integration Approach: Rather than adding separate life skills courses, schools might integrate these competencies within existing subjects. Financial literacy can be taught through mathematics applications, communication skills through English and social studies, and emotional regulation through health education. This approach addresses curriculum overload concerns while ensuring students develop practical competencies.

Collaborative Responsibility Model: Schools and families can share responsibility for life skills development, with schools focusing on skills that complement academic learning (critical thinking, communication, collaboration) while families maintain primary responsibility for values-based skills (personal finance habits, household management, moral development). Clear communication between schools and families can ensure complementary rather than conflicting approaches.

Evidence-Based Implementation: Any life skills integration should be based on rigorous evidence of effectiveness, with proper teacher training, adequate resources, and measurable outcomes. The $11 return on investment for quality SEL programs suggests that well-implemented programs can be cost-effective, but only with appropriate support systems.

Graduated Approach: Schools might begin with universally supported skills (financial literacy, which has 87% public support) and basic social-emotional competencies that clearly enhance academic learning, rather than attempting comprehensive life skills curricula that might generate controversy or strain resources.

The Larger Question

Ultimately, the debate reflects competing visions of education's purpose in American society. The traditional academic excellence model emphasizes knowledge acquisition and intellectual rigor as preparation for higher education and career success. The comprehensive development model emphasizes whole-child education that prepares students for all aspects of adult life.

The evidence suggests both approaches have merit. Students like Marcus, who excel academically but lack practical life skills, represent a genuine problem that schools might help address. However, critics are right that schools cannot and should not try to replace parents or sacrifice academic rigor in pursuit of comprehensive life preparation.

The most sustainable solution likely involves recognizing that modern students need both academic excellence and practical life skills, but that different institutions and stakeholders can contribute to this development in complementary ways. Schools can focus on life skills that enhance academic learning and prepare students for civic participation, while families maintain primary responsibility for values-based skills and personal development.

With 75.8% of Americans supporting policies requiring financial education and clear evidence that social-emotional skills enhance academic achievement, there appears to be public mandate for some form of life skills education. The challenge is implementing such programs thoughtfully, with adequate resources, clear boundaries, and respect for both academic excellence and family values.

The students graduating today will face a complex world requiring both intellectual capabilities and practical life skills. The debate shouldn't be whether they need both sets of competencies — clearly they do — but rather how schools, families, and communities can work together to ensure all students graduate prepared for both academic success and adult life.

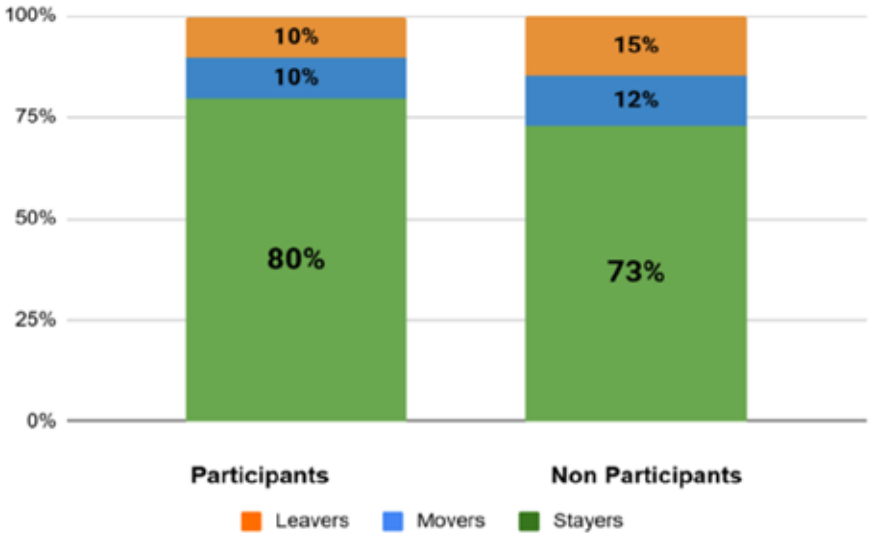
Strengthening Oklahoma's Educator Workforce Through Teacher Induction and Mentoring

Autumn Kouba, Senior Director of Teacher Recruitment and Retention, OSDE, June 2026

One of the most pressing challenges facing PreK-12 classrooms in Oklahoma is teacher retention. In 2024-2025, Oklahoma Public Schools employed 44,679 classroom teachers. Of those 44,679 teachers, only 41,800 were reported as returning classroom teachers for the 2025-2026 school year. Of the teachers who left, 38% were in their first three years of teaching2. This challenge brings great opportunities to strengthen and stabilize the educator workforce through intentional support for early-career teachers. Oklahoma has made meaningful progress in recruiting teachers through various pathways. However, recruitment alone will not solve the long-term teacher shortage. The true measure of success is whether teachers remain in the classroom long enough to become highly effective educators.

2024-2025 First Class Teacher Induction Program one-year retention results from paired sample

2025-2026 Data



Across Oklahoma, many early-career teachers enter the profession passionate about serving students, but they often face overwhelming demands during their first years in the classroom. Results from the 2025 Oklahoma Educator Engagement Survey showed that only 68% of educators felt that they could manage their job responsibilities in a way that enabled a healthy work-life balance3. Much like experienced teachers, new teachers are also expected to manage instruction, classroom culture, family communication, assessment, curriculum alignment, student behavior, and increasing academic expectations. In rural districts and high-need schools, teachers may feel isolated or underprepared without consistent coaching and support. These challenges contribute significantly to burnout and attrition during the first three to five years of teaching.

This challenge also presents one of Oklahoma's greatest opportunities. Research consistently demonstrates that high-quality teacher induction programs improve teacher retention. A 2017 study found that teachers who received induction support during their first-year experienced lower rates of migration and attrition, suggesting that induction is a promising strategy for improving workforce stability. The graph located in the Appendix displays one-year retention results from the 2024-2025 Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDE) First Class Teacher Induction Program. First-year teachers who participated in the program had an 80% retention rate, compared with 73% for non-participants. It's important to note that teacher induction is far more than a simple orientation process.

Effective induction programs provide sustained support through mentoring, coaching, professional learning, opportunities for collaboration, classroom observations, and targeted instructional guidance. Research by Ingersoll and Smith found that beginning teachers who received multiple forms of induction support, including mentoring, collaboration, and structured professional guidance, are significantly more likely to remain in the profession than those who receive little or no support. According to the Learning Policy Institute, high-quality induction programs that include mentoring, coaching, and ongoing feedback not only improve teacher retention but also accelerate professional growth and enhance student outcomes. When early-career teachers receive structured support from experienced mentors, they are more likely to develop confidence, remain in the profession, and grow into effective educators who contribute to school stability and student success over time.

In Oklahoma, this work is especially important given the ongoing need to support alternative and emergency-certified teachers. According to the 2025 Teacher Certification Data Report, 4,382 teaching certificates were issued to new educators for the 2024-25 school year. Of those 4,382 certificates, 780 were provisional, and 1,634 were emergency. Therefore, over half of the new teachers entering the profession had not been recommended for certification from a traditional Educator Preparation Program. Many individuals entering the profession through nontraditional pathways bring valuable content knowledge and life expe-

rience but may require additional instructional support as they learn classroom management, lesson design, student engagement strategies, and differentiated instruction. Mentoring provides these teachers with practical guidance and real-time support that cannot always be replicated through coursework alone.

Investing in induction and mentoring also benefits students directly. Students thrive when they experience instructional consistency and strong teacher-student relationships. Frequent teacher turnover disrupts learning environments and can negatively impact school culture and academic progress. A 2024 study examining a centralized teacher allocation system found that teacher turnover has a statistically significant negative effect on student achievement and that the effects can persist for up to two years. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were particularly affected. By supporting teachers early in their careers, Oklahoma can improve retention rates while simultaneously improving educational outcomes for students across the state.

If I could advance one policy recommendation for Oklahoma education, it would be to develop and sustain funding for a statewide teacher induction and mentoring framework for all early-career educators. Connecticut's statewide Teacher Education and Mentoring (TEAM) Program demonstrates the impact of sustained support for beginning educators. Through a structured two-year induction model that pairs new teachers with trained mentors, the state has reported a 91% retention rate among teachers who complete the program, highlighting the potential return on investment in comprehensive induction systems. Similarly, Oklahoma's framework should provide multi-year support for beginning teachers, prioritize high-quality mentor training, and ensure districts have the resources necessary to implement meaningful mentoring systems. The policy should also include dedicated support for emergency-certified and alternatively certified teachers as they transition toward full certification.

Importantly, this recommendation is not simply about adding another initiative. It is about creating a long-term educator workforce strategy that strengthens recruitment investments already being made across the state. Oklahoma has worked diligently to bring more teachers into classrooms. The next step is ensuring those teachers are equipped, supported, and encouraged to stay.

A statewide induction and mentoring framework could also help address disparities between districts. While some schools have strong mentoring systems already in place, others lack the staffing capacity or financial resources to provide sustained support for new teachers. Data from the 2025-26 Certified Personnel Report shows that only 121 districts reported staffing certified teacher trainers or instructional coaches. A statewide commitment would help ensure that all beginning educators, regardless of geographic location or district size, receive access to high-quality support during the most critical years of their careers.

Ultimately, Oklahoma's educational future depends not only on attracting talented individuals into teaching but also on creating the conditions that allow them to succeed and remain in the profession. Early-career teachers need intentional systems of support that recognize the complexity of teaching and the importance of professional growth. By prioritizing teacher induction and mentoring, Oklahoma has an opportunity to strengthen its educator pipeline, improve student outcomes, and build a more stable and sustainable educational system for years to come.

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Rethinking Oklahoma Education: From Compliance to Curiosity

Brysn Hunt, Director of Workforce Development: Association of Oklahoma General Contractors

Oklahoma ranks near the bottom of nearly every national education metric. That fact is sobering. However, it is also an opportunity. When a system is performing this poorly for this long, it becomes harder to defend the status quo. Parents, employers, community leaders, and policymakers are increasingly asking questions they might not have asked a decade ago: What should an education actually prepare a student for? What does effective learning look like? And why, after decades of reform efforts, are we still here?

Those are the right questions. This article attempts to offer some answers, grounded in experience both inside the classroom and in the workforce.

The Opportunity Before Us

Public frustration with Oklahoma's education outcomes has created a rare opening for honest conversation. Ranked 50th in some national comparisons, there is little room left to defend incremental adjustments to the existing model. That dissatisfaction, while painful, is generating genuine openness to new ideas in a way that more comfortable systems rarely produce.

One area where that openness is yielding results is in the growing emphasis on career exploration, career and technology education (Career Tech), concurrent enrollment, and internship opportunities. These pathways allow students to explore their interests and aptitudes before graduation, connecting classroom learning to real-world application. Oklahoma has built one of the strongest Career Tech systems in the country, and leaning further into that infrastructure represents one of our clearest paths forward. The appetite is there: from students, from employers, and increasingly from educators and administrators who see what engagement looks like when students are given something meaningful to work toward.

Challenge One: The Classroom Model Hasn't Changed
Despite decades of reform conversation, the dominant model of what a classroom looks like (and what "learning" is supposed to look like inside it) has remained remarkably fixed. Students sit in rows. Teachers deliver content. Tests measure retention. Repeat.

Having taught in Oklahoma public schools, the outcomes of this model were visible every day: disengaged students going through the motions, learning just enough to pass and forgetting it shortly after. It wasn't until instruction moved away from lecture and toward hands-on, applied learning that genuine curiosity appeared. Students who seemed unreachable became engaged the moment they had something to touch, build, or operate.

That experience mirrors what happens during workforce outreach today. When visiting schools on behalf of the construction industry, the difference in student engagement between a presentation and a hands-on simulator is not subtle. It is dramatic. Students who appeared disinterested minutes before will spend an hour trying to grade a road on a piece of equipment. That is not a coincidence. It reflects something real about how human beings, particularly young ones, actually learn.

The problem is not that teachers don't know this. Most do. The problem is that the system is not designed to support it.
Challenge Two: Regulation Has Made Schools Identical
Oklahoma has repeatedly attempted to improve education outcomes through legislation by mandating seat-time requirements, extending school calendars, directing how funds must be spent within schools, and layering reporting obligations on top of one another. Each of these interventions was likely well-intentioned. Collectively, they have produced a system in which schools across the state are structurally required to look and operate the same way.

This is not a conservative or liberal critique, it is a practical one. When you regulate the inputs heavily enough, you eliminate the possibility of innovation at the local level. Administrators who might otherwise experiment with scheduling, instructional models, or community partnerships find themselves hemmed in by compliance requirements. Even charter schools, theoretically designed to offer alternatives, operate under many of the same constraints. The result is a system that is uniform in its mediocrity. And when outcomes remain poor regardless of how much funding flows through that uniform system, the instinct is often to add more regulation rather than question the regulatory framework itself.

A Policy Recommendation: Set Standards, Free the Methods

If Oklahoma is serious about improving educational outcomes, the most impactful shift would be a structural one: separate the question of what students should know and be able to do from the question of how schools get them there. The state's role should be to define clear, competency-based academic standards articulating what Oklahoma students should understand, be capable of, and have experienced by the time they graduate. Critically, those standards should be developed collaboratively, through a coalition that includes representation from school districts across the state. Standards written by and for the educators who will implement them are far more likely to reflect the real diversity of Oklahoma's communities than standards handed down from above.

Once those standards are established, the means of achieving them should be left to local schools, administrators,

teachers, and boards. Some schools may find that traditional classroom instruction serves their students well. Others may build their model around project-based learning, Career Tech integration, or community apprenticeships. The point is that local educators (who know their students, their communities, and their resources) are better positioned to make those decisions than a legislative body in Oklahoma City.

Accountability in this model would shift from process to outcome. Schools would not be penalized for how they teach, but they would be expected to demonstrate that their students are meeting the standards. That distinction matters enormously. Outcome-based accountability preserves the incentive to perform while creating the freedom to innovate.

This is not a call to abandon accountability. It is a call to make accountability meaningful, to measure what actually matters rather than whether a school has checked the right procedural boxes.

Conclusion

Oklahoma's educational challenges are significant, but they are not mysterious. We have a model of education that was designed for a different economy and a different era, held in place by layers of well-intentioned regulation that have made genuine innovation nearly impossible. Meanwhile, we have a Career Tech system that is the envy of other states, an employer community that is hungry for prepared workers, and students who, when given the right environment, are as curious and capable as any in the country. The opportunity is real. What is required now is the willingness to trust local communities to seize it.

A Mixed Methods Case Study Program Evaluation of a Middle School Career Exploration Program

Sharon L. James, K20 Center Research, 2024

Introduction

This intervention brief explores the research article "A Mixed Methods Case Study Program Evaluation of a Middle School Career Exploration Program" by Sharon L. James, published in 2024. The article addresses the effectiveness of a middle school career exploration program in the Broken Arrow Public School District. The research problem focuses on evaluating the program to determine necessary adjustments for enhancing student success. The objectives are to identify the most important components of the program, the professional development needs of teachers, and stakeholders' perceptions of the program's effectiveness. The significance of the research lies in its potential to improve career readiness and informed decision-making among middle school students.

Methodology

Research Design:
The study employs a mixed-methods explanatory sequential design, combining quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the career exploration program.

Sample:
The sample includes 55 middle school teachers, five school counselors, and five administrators from five middle schools in the Broken Arrow Public School District. These participants were involved in the implementation and support of the career exploration program.

Data Analysis:
Quantitative data were collected through a teacher survey, and qualitative data were gathered through interviews with school counselors and administrators. The survey responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while the interview transcripts were coded and analyzed to identify themes and patterns.

Results

The study identifies six key themes that provide insights into the effectiveness of the middle school career exploration program:

1. **Collaboration between Teachers and Counselors:** Effective collaboration is essential for the successful implementation of the program. Teachers and counselors need to work together to support students in their career exploration activities.
2. **Commitment to Continuous Improvement:** The program requires ongoing evaluation and refinement to enhance its effectiveness. Feedback from teachers and counselors is crucial for making necessary adjustments.
3. **Early Awareness:** Introducing career exploration at the middle school level is crucial for guiding students toward informed career decisions. Early exposure helps students connect their interests and strengths to potential career paths.
4. **Intentional Implementation:** The program should be integrated into specific core subjects, and teachers with a positive attitude toward career exploration should be selected to lead the activities.
5. **Student Engagement:** Engaging students through hands-on activities, project-based learning, and career fairs is key to fostering their interest and active participation in the program.
6. **Teacher Training and Mindset:** Comprehensive and scaffolded professional development is necessary to equip teachers with the skills and knowledge to effectively implement the program. A positive teacher mindset toward career exploration significantly influences the program's success.

The implications of these results suggest that while the program has a positive impact on student confidence and early exposure to career paths, there are areas that need improvement. Enhancing resource effectiveness, increasing student engagement, and providing better professional development for teachers are essential for the program's success.

Application into Practice

To replicate this intervention in a school context, educators can:

1. **Foster Collaboration:** Encourage collaboration between teachers and counselors to support the implementation of career exploration activities. Regular meetings and joint planning sessions can facilitate this collaboration.
2. **Commit to Continuous Improvement:** Establish a system for continuous program assessment and adaptation. Collect feedback from teachers, students, and other stakeholders to identify areas for improvement and make necessary adjustments.
3. **Introduce Early Awareness:** Start career exploration activities at the middle school level to help students connect their interests and strengths to potential career paths. Provide opportunities for students to explore various careers through hands-on activities and career fairs.

4. **Implement Intentionally:** Integrate career exploration into specific core subjects and select teachers who are enthusiastic about the program to lead the activities. Provide support and resources to help these teachers succeed.
5. **Engage Students:** Use engaging and interactive methods such as project-based learning and career fairs to capture students' interest and encourage active participation in the program.
6. **Provide Comprehensive Training:** Offer comprehensive and scaffolded professional development for teachers to equip them with the skills and knowledge needed to effectively implement the program. Focus on building a positive mindset toward career exploration.

By integrating these strategies, schools can create a dynamic and engaging career exploration program that supports student interests and career development.

Work Cited

James, S. L. (2024). A Mixed Methods Case Study Program Evaluation of a Middle School Career Exploration Program. Oral Roberts University.

Notes

This is a resource document for you to use.
Take notes, highlight, use as a text book.

SB 1734, the Oklahoma Responsible Technology in Schools Act

Danny Mattox, M.Ed., Associate Director, K20 Center for Educational and Community Renewal

Town Hall Editor's Note

Artificial intelligence is transforming education at an unprecedented pace, and Oklahoma's new Responsible Technology in Schools Act (SB 1734) provides important guidance for educators as they navigate this evolving landscape. Signed into law on May 12, 2026, and effective July 1, 2026, the legislation establishes a framework for the responsible use of AI in Oklahoma schools and requires every local board of education to adopt an AI policy before the start of the 2027–2028 school year. To help educators better understand what the law means in practice, we are pleased to share the following article by Danny Mattox, M.Ed., Associate Director, K20 Center for Educational and Community Renewal. His overview provides a practical, teacher-focused guide to what has changed, what educators should do now, and the key provisions of the new law.

A teacher's one-pager: what changed, what you do now, and which boxes to check.

Signed May 12, 2026. Effective July 1, 2026. Your board must adopt an AI policy before the 2027-2028 school year.

Short version: this law does not require you to use AI, and it does not ban it. It sets guardrails. One idea runs through every section, taken straight from the statute's findings: a teacher stays in charge, and AI is meant to supplement your instruction, not replace it. Below is what that means for your classroom. Each point is tied to the section of the law it comes from, with the citation in the footnote.

What the law requires of you

1. AI use has to be educator-directed. A teacher or authorized employee directs and supervises it, and the decision stays with you, not the tool and not the vendor.
2. Keep a human in the loop. Review anything AI produces before it goes into instruction, feedback, grading, or any decision.
3. AI cannot make the high-stakes calls. It may not be the primary basis for grading, discipline, placement, promotion, retention, or similar decisions.
4. Match the tool to the student. A student-facing tool must be age- and developmentally appropriate and used for a clearly defined instructional purpose.
5. Protect student data. Tools must comply with FERPA, and you should share the least student data necessary to do the job.
6. Be transparent. Students and families should understand the role of the tools you use and their limits.
7. Families can opt out. A parent may opt a student out of student-facing AI tools, in writing, at any time, with no academic penalty and no loss of core instructional content.
8. The district discloses once a year. At least annually, the district must tell families every AI tool in use, the vendor, the categories of student data collected, how far that data is shared, and the purpose of each tool. Your list of tools feeds that disclosure.
9. A board policy is coming. Your board must adopt an AI policy before the 2027-2028 school year, covering permitted uses, prohibited uses, data protection, transparency, periodic review, and alignment with the State Department of Education's guidance.

Your boxes to check this year

- Keep a running list of every AI tool you use with students: name, vendor, what it does. The district's annual parent disclosure depends on it.
- Review anything AI generates before it counts toward instruction, feedback, or a grade.
- Never let a tool assign a final grade, flag discipline, or decide placement on its own.
- State the instructional purpose before using a student-facing tool, and keep it age-appropriate.
- Minimize student data: keep full names, student IDs, IEP details, and rosters out of general AI tools.
- Build an AI-disclosure habit into assignments so students note when and how they used it.
- Have a non-AI path to the same learning ready for any student whose family opts out.
- Check any new tool against your district's approved list and OSDE's low / medium / high risk levels before classroom use.

But doesn't almost everything have AI in it now?

Fair question, and close to the real problem with the law. SB 1734 borrows its definition of "AI" from a 2020 federal statute that predates ChatGPT. Read literally, that definition is enormous. It covers any system that makes predictions, recommendations, or decisions, which would sweep in autocorrect, search suggestions, Netflix-style recommendations, and most adaptive learning platforms. The State Department of Education says as much in its own materials, noting that AI is already embedded in everyday tools like Canvas, Google Docs, and Netflix, and that it should be treated as a tool that still needs human oversight.

Two things keep this manageable. First, your actual duties attach to the law's narrower terms, a "classroom AI tool" or a "student-facing AI tool," both of which require the tool to be used as part of an instructional activity. The broad federal

definition sets the outer boundary; the narrower terms do the real work. Second, when you are unsure, use a simple test: is a student or a teacher using this software for instruction? If yes, treat it as in scope, keep a human in the loop, and disclose it. If it is back-office plumbing like a spam filter or bus routing, it is not what this law is aimed at, even if it technically fits the definition. When a specific tool sits on the line, that is exactly what OSDE's risk levels and your district's vetting are for.

Where the state comes in, and where to get help

The law tells the State Department of Education to publish guidance, and your district's eventual policy has to align with it. That guidance already exists, along with a model policy, a plain-language explainer, FAQs, and family guides. These are the documents to lean on rather than guessing.

- Guidance and Considerations for Using AI in Oklahoma K-12 Schools (Version 2.0): *https://oklahoma.gov/content/dam/ok/en/osde/ai-and-digital-learning/Guidance%20and%20Considerations%20for%20Using%20Artificial%20Intelligence%20in%20Oklahoma%20K-12%20Schools%202.0.pdf*
- Model AI Use Policy for districts (includes a tool-vetting rubric, risk-level tool, and family notice templates): *https://oklahoma.gov/content/dam/ok/en/osde/ai-and-digital-learning/Model%20Policy%20Artificial%20Intelligence%20AI%20Use%20in%20Schools.docx.pdf*
- What AI Is and Is Not (one-page explainer): *https://oklahoma.gov/content/dam/ok/en/osde/ai-and-digital-learning/What%20is%20AI.p*df
- FAQs about AI in K-12 Education: *https://oklahoma.gov/content/dam/ok/en/osde/ai-and-digital-learning/FAQs%20about%20AI.pdf*
- AI Family Guides by grade band, and free OSDE Connect courses (AI 101, AI for Leaders, AI Prompt Writing): *https://oklahoma.gov/education/services/standards-learning/artificial-intelligence--ai--and-digital-learning1.html*
- EdTech Support Hub (real people, not a chatbot): *AI-Help@sde.ok.gov*

This is general information to help you understand SB 1734. It is not legal advice, and I am not your attorney. Your district's adopted policy and your district's or board's legal counsel govern any specific situation. When in doubt, ask your principal, your district's designated AI lead, or OSDE's EdTech Support Hub.

How this document was made

This guide was drafted with AI and then directed and reviewed by a human, which is the same arrangement the law asks for: educator-directed, with a person keeping final say. The author set the structure and the editorial standards, supplied the classroom judgment, ran the draft through several rounds of revision, and caught what it got wrong, including, at first, the absence of this note. Claude, an AI assistant from Anthropic, handled the source research, wrote the plain-language explanations and the commentary in red, and assembled the file. The statutory text is the public law itself.

It is here because a handout that tells you to disclose AI use should model what it preaches.

Citation: J. Whaley, SB 1734: A Teacher's One-Pager (2026). Drafted with Claude (Anthropic) under the author's direction and review.

The text of SB 1734, annotated

The black text is the enrolled law as signed. The notes in red are my plain-language and practical commentary, marked with >. *(Red, as requested. I did my best to keep the commandments and the commentary clearly separate.)*

ENROLLED SENATE BILL NO. 1734

By: Seifried of the Senate and Moore of the House

An Act relating to schools; stating legislative findings; creating the Oklahoma Responsible Technology in Schools Act; providing short title; providing purpose; defining terms; directing certain artificial intelligence tools to be implemented in public school districts under certain direction; requiring artificial intelligence use to comply with certain provisions; directing school districts to provide certain parents and legal guardians with certain written disclosure with certain frequency; providing for contents of disclosure; allowing a parent or legal guardian to opt a student out of certain participation; prohibiting such student from being penalized or denied certain access; directing the State Department of Education to develop and make available guidance regarding certain use of artificial intelligence and emerging technologies; requiring school district boards of education to adopt certain policy prior to the beginning of certain school year; providing for minimum contents of policy; providing certain construction; providing for promulgation of rules; providing for codification; providing an effective date; and declaring an emergency.

SUBJECT: Artificial intelligence in schools

BE IT ENACTED BY THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF OKLAHOMA:

SECTION 1. NEW LAW A new section of law to be codified in the Oklahoma Statutes as Section 11-120 of Title 70, unless there is created a duplication in numbering, reads as follows:

A. The Legislature finds that technology in the classroom including artificial intelligence is increasingly present and pervasive in educational environments. Classroom teachers play an essential and irreplaceable role in a student's educational career, and artificial intelligence tools, when used in classrooms, should supplement educator-led instruction, not supplant it. The absence of consistent guardrails for student-facing emerging technologies may increase risks to student data privacy and instructional integrity.

> *This is the "why." Findings are not rules you can violate, but courts read the rest of the law in their light. The sentence that matters is that AI should supplement in-*

struction, not supplant it. Every requirement that follows is an expression of that one line.

B. This act shall be known and may be cited as the "Oklahoma Responsible Technology in Schools Act". The purpose of the act is to provide clarity, accountability, and consistency by:

1. Establishing principles and guardrails for the appropriate and responsible use of artificial intelligence in public school districts in this state;
2. Protecting student data, privacy, and educational integrity;
3. Preserving local control and educator discretion; and
4. Supporting transparency to students and families.

> *The official name and four purposes. Purpose 3, preserving local control and educator discretion, is the reason this law sets guardrails instead of handing you a mandated list of approved products. It also means your district is free to be stricter than the floor set here.*

C. As used in this act:

1. "Artificial intelligence" or "AI" means a system or application consistent with the definition set forth in 15 U.S.C., Section 9401(3);
2. "Classroom AI tool" means an artificial intelligence application used to support instruction, learning activities, assessment assistance, or educator workflows in a school setting;
3. "Educator-directed AI use" means use of an artificial intelligence tool under the supervision and professional judgment of a teacher or school employee;
4. "Student-facing AI tool" means an artificial intelligence tool designed for use by students that provides AI-generated content, feedback, or assistance as part of an instructional activity; and
5. "Human-in-the-loop" means that an educator or authorized school employee maintains oversight, review, and final decision-making authority over outputs generated by an artificial intelligence tool.

> *Read these twice; the whole law turns on them. Notice the two buckets. A "classroom AI tool" is anything that supports instruction, assessment, or your workflow. A "student-facing AI tool" is one students use directly, and the opt-out in subsection G attaches to that kind. "Human-in-the-loop" in C5 is the spine of the statute: a person keeps oversight, review, and final say. C1 is the one to watch, because it imports a broad 2020 federal definition that, read literally, could reach autocorrect or a recommendation engine. Your obligations are scoped by the narrower terms above, not by that outer boundary, so the breadth of C1 should not panic you.*

D. Artificial intelligence tools used for instructional or educational purposes in public school districts in this state shall be implemented under the direction of an educator, subject to applicable law and the policy of the school district board of education.

> *Plain version: a human educator has to be driving. Not the software, and not the vendor.*

E. If artificial intelligence is used in a public school district in this state, such use shall be subject to the following:

1. All classroom AI tools shall be deployed through educator-directed AI use. The responsibility for decisions informed by artificial intelligence shall remain with school employees and shall not be delegated to an artificial intelligence system or vendor;

> *You own the decision. You cannot hand the call to the tool or to the company that built it. "The AI flagged it" is not a defense.*

2. Classroom AI tools and student-facing AI tools shall operate with a human-in-the-loop. Outputs generated by artificial intelligence shall be reviewed by an educator or authorized school employee prior to use in instruction, feedback, assessment, or decision-making;

> *The most testable sentence in the law. Before AI output is used in instruction, feedback, assessment, or a decision, a person reviews it. Make this a habit, because it is the one thing a parent or an auditor can actually check.*

3. Artificial intelligence tools shall not be used as the primary basis for student grading, discipline, placement, promotion, retention, or other high-stakes educational decisions;

> *A hard stop. AI can inform these calls, but it cannot be the primary basis for them. Grades, discipline, placement, promotion, retention: a human decides, on the record.*

4. Student-facing AI tools shall be appropriate to the age and developmental level of students and shall be used only for clearly defined educational or instructional purposes;

> *Age-appropriate and purpose-bound. "We used a chatbot because the kids liked it" will not satisfy this. Name the instructional purpose before you reach for the tool.*

5. Artificial intelligence tools shall comply with applicable federal and state student data privacy and security laws including the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA) and shall meet recognized industry standards or otherwise stringent private audit and security standards. School districts shall take reasonable steps to minimize the amount of student data shared with artificial intelligence tools; and

> *FERPA plus data minimization. Share the least student data necessary. In practice, keep full names, student IDs, IEP details, and rosters out of general tools. The "recognized industry standards" language is vague and*

lets vendors self-certify, so lean on your district's vetting and OSDE's risk levels rather than a vendor's word.

6. School districts in this state shall address transparency regarding the instructional use of artificial intelligence including communication to students and families regarding the role and limitations of such tools.

> *Transparency. Students and families should know what a tool does and what it cannot do. This pairs with the annual disclosure in subsection F.*

F. Each school district shall provide parents or legal guardians of students enrolled in the district with a written disclosure not less than annually. The disclosure shall identify:

1. All artificial intelligence tools in use in the district;
2. The vendors providing the artificial intelligence tools;
3. The categories of student data collected;
4. The extent to which student data is shared; and
5. The educational purpose for which each artificial intelligence tool is used.

> *A district duty, not a teacher duty, but it runs on your information. The five required fields add up to a tool inventory. If the list of what teachers actually use with students is incomplete, the district's disclosure is wrong. That is why keeping a running list now matters more than it looks.*

G. The parent or legal guardian of a student enrolled in a school district may provide written notice opting the student out of participating in student-facing AI tools at any time. Students who opt out shall not be academically penalized or denied access to core instructional content.

> *The opt-out. Written, any time, for student-facing tools, with no penalty and no loss of core content. The practical consequence for you: for any student-facing tool, have a non-AI path to the same learning ready before you assign it. Note the limit too, the opt-out covers student-facing tools, not your own use of AI to plan a lesson or build a rubric.*

H. The State Department of Education shall develop and make available guidance regarding the responsible use of artificial intelligence and emerging technologies for public school districts in this state.

> *OSDE guidance. This already exists: Guidance and Considerations for Using AI in Oklahoma K-12 Schools, Version 2.0, plus a model policy, FAQs, and family guides. Subsection I.6 below ties your district's policy to this guidance, so it is required reading for whoever writes that policy, not optional.*

I. Prior to the beginning of the 2027-2028 school year, each school district board of education shall adopt and maintain a policy governing the use of artificial intelligence and emerging technologies. The policy shall at a minimum:

1. Identify roles or school employees responsible for approving and overseeing the use of artificial intelligence tools;
2. Address appropriate instructional uses and prohibited uses;
3. Address student data protection and data minimization practices;
4. Address transparency to students and families;
5. Provide for periodic review and updates; and
6. Comply with the provisions set forth in subsection E of this section and the guidance developed by the State Department of Education.

> *The deadline that actually has a date on it: a board-adopted policy before the 2027-2028 school year, with six required elements. Most Oklahoma districts have not adopted one yet, which is normal given the runway. If you sit on a committee shaping it, this list is your outline, and OSDE's model policy is the obvious starting draft.*

J. Nothing in this section shall be construed to:

1. Require a public school district in this state to use artificial intelligence in any school; or
2. Limit the authority of school district boards of education to make decisions regarding instructional methods or technology use.

> *Belt and suspenders. No district is forced to use AI, and boards keep authority over instructional methods. If a vendor ever tells your district that this law requires their product, this subsection says the opposite.*

K. The State Board of Education may promulgate rules to implement the provisions of this section.

> *The State Board may issue rules later. Translation: details can still change. Draft against subsection E and current OSDE guidance now, and leave room to adjust when rules land.*

SECTION 2. This act shall become effective July 1, 2026.

> *The standard effective date.*

SECTION 3. It being immediately necessary for the preservation of the public peace, health, or safety, an emergency is hereby declared to exist, by reason whereof this act shall take effect and be in full force from and after its passage and approval.

> *The emergency clause. It made the act effective on the Governor's signature, May 12, 2026, rather than waiting. The runway you actually plan around is still the 2027-2028 policy deadline in subsection I.*

Preparing Students for the AI Economy: Why Soft Skills Must Be Central to CTE

Robert Sommers, Oklahoma Education Journal, October 27, 2025

Generative artificial intelligence is reshaping the American workforce faster than any previous technological disruption. It is hard to know how AI will disrupt the economy or which jobs it will eventually displace and create, but the conventional wisdom is that repair technicians, welders, and healthcare workers will remain relatively insulated compared to white-collar workers, at least in the near future. In this shifting environment, state leaders have repeatedly highlighted Oklahoma's career and technical education (CTE) system as key to ensuring that the state's workforce stays competitive. Yet we haven't heard enough about what role CTE should play in an AI-driven economy.

If history is any guide, failing to adapt to disruptive innovation can prove costly. Kodak, once the global leader in photography, clung to its film business even as digital imaging took off, an error that ultimately led to its demise. RCA, an icon of the analog music era, made a similar mistake when transistors transformed audio technology. While CTE programs are unlikely to vanish in such dramatic fashion, they do face a similar risk of obsolescence if they cannot adapt their models to the demands of an AI-transformed labor market.

From Technical Training to Human Capability

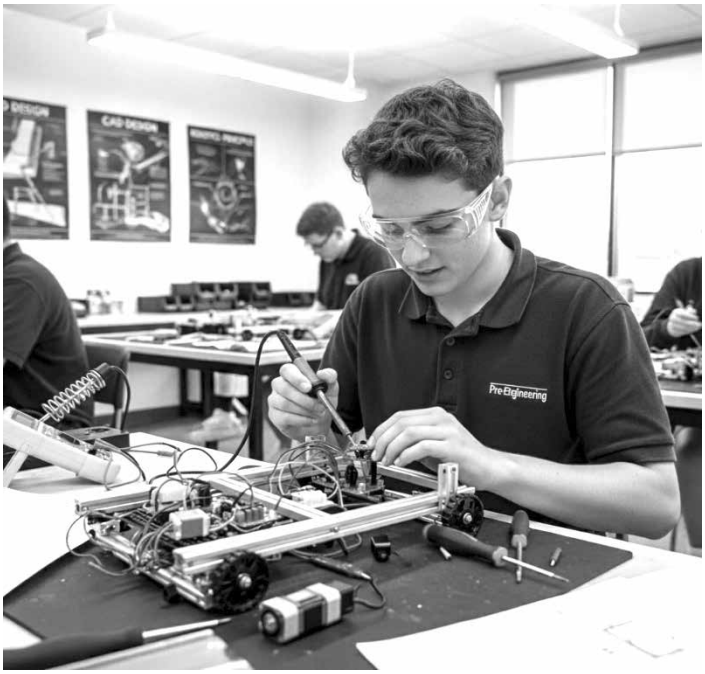
Artificial intelligence is accelerating a profound shift toward a new kind of labor market that prizes not only technical expertise, but also human qualities machines cannot easily replicate. Employers are increasingly seeking workers who bring soft skills: the constellation of interpersonal, cognitive, and self-management abilities that make people effective collaborators, communicators, and problem-solvers. These skills are also referred to as durable skills, 21st-century skills, social and emotional skills, and non-cognitive skills. Although not all these terms are precisely equivalent, they all refer to sets of skills including resilience, creativity, initiative, ethical judgment, and adaptability that go beyond – or may emerge from – the acquisition of traditional academic competencies.

For CTE to be most effective in the future, it must intentionally teach these competencies alongside technical and academic skills. Employers rate these soft skills as having critical importance, and in some cases, see them as even more valuable than specific technical skills.

Measuring Soft Skills within CTE Systems

A purpose-driven CTE system requires both a focus on clearly defined skills needed in present and future workplaces and methods of measuring success based on outcomes, including both the career and technical skills that are the focus of each program and the soft skills a student needs to succeed in building a career.

To illustrate how these soft skills can be incorporated into



CTE, consider the following frameworks. First, the MyWays Student Success Framework identifies 20 interrelated competencies across four domains: Content Knowledge, Creative Know-How, Habits of Success, and Wayfinding Abilities. The model blends academic mastery with creativity, self-management, and the capacity to navigate life transitions. A second example is America Succeeds, which focuses on employer-validated soft skills, including communication, critical thinking, collaboration, adaptability, resilience, and growth mindset.

Together, these frameworks highlight the need for CTE to reorient around transferable, human-centered skills. When CTE aligns MyWays' broad developmental competencies with America Succeeds' employer-defined soft skills, it can better prepare students for lifelong adaptability, valuing what learners can do not just what they have studied.

To achieve this alignment, CTE accountability systems must measure outputs and outcomes. Traditional academic metrics such as test scores, graduation rates, and credential attainment remain essential, and a stronger longitudinal data system in Oklahoma might help the state better determine the market value of different academic competencies, as well as new credentials, as neighboring Arkansas and Texas have. However, traditional academic outcomes tell only part of the story. Complementary measures should be developed to include career-readiness indicators, post-CTE placement rates, and assessments of soft skills like teamwork, initiative, and communication.

Innovations in Practice

Across the country, leading CTE programs are already

embedding soft skills within hands-on, industry-aligned experiences.

In Georgia, the Advanced Manufacturing High School Apprenticeship Program follows the German apprenticeship model and connects high school students with local manufacturers, technical colleges, and mentors in fields such as CNC machining, welding, and mechatronics. Students earn industry-recognized credentials and college credit while building the collaboration, adaptability, and communication skills that employers prize.

Emerging technologies are enabling new kinds of simulated work that can transform CTE practice. Extended reality (XR)—including virtual and augmented reality can provide realistic simulations that may improve learning outcomes while reducing training costs, especially in health care and advanced manufacturing. Kentucky's deployment of 2,450 Meta Quest headsets represents the nation's largest XR-based CTE initiative. As XR and AI become more affordable and accessible, they offer powerful tools for teaching both technical precision and human judgment.

Finally, mastery- and competency-based instructional models can help CTE educators orient learning around students' goals. By teaching academic content through applied CTE projects and using rigorous, high-quality assessments to evaluate mastery of both technical and soft skills, schools can certify students as career-ready once they demonstrate the competencies needed to thrive in college, work, or further learning.

A Call for Purpose-Driven Transformation

CTE stands at a crossroads. If it continues to rely solely on traditional curricula, it risks being left behind by the pace of technological change. But if CTE leaders align programs with the skills that employers value most (i.e., technical expertise, academic rigor, and soft skills), it can help prepare Oklahoma's students and workers to be resilient to automation and ready for lifelong growth.

Those who can blend their technical expertise with distinctly human strengths, including creativity, empathy, collaboration, and judgment, will be best equipped to face the coming economic changes. In an AI-driven economy, success is likely to depend on mastering both the tools that power innovation and the soft skills that give that innovation purpose.

Author Bio

Robert Sommers is CEO of Cogniac Consultants, former Oklahoma Secretary of Education, and former Director of the Oklahoma Department of Career and Technology Education.

A Superintendent's Vision Turned an Oil Site Into a Career Launchpad

Arianna Prothero, Education Week, February 9, 2026

Tomball , Texas - Superintendent Martha Salazar-Zamora's unlikely vision for a career and technical education utopia here emerged back in 2021, as she toured the site of a bankrupt oil field-services company.

A wall of windows in the former executive conference room and a private patio yielded a perfect view of the company's one-time fiefdom: 70 acres and 11 buildings.

Karla Sandoval, the Tomball Independent School District's head of career and technical education, who joined her boss and a real estate agent on the visit, recalled Salazar-Zamora explaining her plan to buy the property, and move some personnel into its deserted office buildings.

Then the superintendent gestured to a sea of abandoned warehouses and outbuildings.



As the Team Tomball leader, Dr. Salazar-Zamora has elevated Tomball ISD into a high performing school district and as the #1 Best School District in Harris County for the seventh straight year, according to Niche rankings. Tomball ISD was recognized among the coveted list of Top Workplaces by Houston Chronicle, represented as the highest ranking educational entity on the list.

"That is CTE," Sandoval recalled Salazar-Zamora saying to her. "Are you ready for the challenge?"

Sandoval laughed as she replayed the exchange more than four years later.

"I was like 'yes,'" she said. "And in my head, I'm going, 'Oh my gosh, I hope I can deliver.'"

And deliver, Salazar-Zamora and her team have done.

From warehouses to classrooms

On an early December day this school year, inside a warehouse building converted into classrooms, graphic design students in the fabrication lab press "Hope Squad" decals onto shirts for a districtwide mental health initiative.

In another classroom, students in the aviation program practice takeoffs and landings on desktop plane simulators.

Inside former office buildings, students in the legal-studies pathway enact a mock trial in a room refurbished as a courtroom. A couple of doors down, students in the district's law-enforcement pathway practice pulling over a driver in a 360-degree virtual simulation.

On the back of the property in what was once a shell of a building without walls, now stands a 45,000-square-foot agricultural arena that hosts robotics competitions and livestock shows.

This is how a handful of the district's 28 career pathways make use of a property that many would have written off as a sad casualty of the pandemic four years ago.

"Purchasing the oil and gas company site, which is now the Tomball Innovation Center, it was a dream in my head that grew and grew and grew," said Salazar-Zamora, known informally in this district of more than 23,000 students as Dr. Z.

That purchase has been instrumental in the expansion of Tomball's CTE program.

CTE enrollment has risen from 6,520 students in the 2019-20 school year to 9,415 this year, fueled in part by rising enrollment districtwide.

Last year, Tomball students earned a total of 1,250 indus-

try-based certifications, up from 572 in the 2020-21 school year. The number of students participating in work-based learning has nearly tripled since the 2020-21 school year, to 318 this year.

The district has added two CTE coordinators, one of whom is dedicated to agriculture, two CTE counselors, and a CTE work-based learning specialist since the 2020-21 school year. That brought Tomball's total team of CTE educators to 115 teachers and administrators.

Salazar-Zamora is the type of leader higher-flyers are drawn to work for

Originally, Tomball and the company that once owned the property, BJ Services, planned to create an academy of energy and international business. But then the pandemic hit, delivering an economic blow that BJ Services couldn't survive and scuttling the district's hopes for the specialized academy.

From the ashes of that plan rose another, when Salazar-Zamora happened to drive by the empty building one day and see a for sale sign. Tomball bought the land for $39.5 million in 2021, a fraction of the $115 million the property was valued at, according to district officials.

The site now houses district administrative offices, CTE classrooms, and Tomball Star Academy, the district's early-college high school. Because the site was bought in bankruptcy, the district got everything on the property, from coffee cups to large, built-in cranes.

Michael Pratt, a member of the district's board of trustees, recalled his first reaction to Salazar-Zamora's pitch to purchase the oil company's property: "OK, that's big. It's a great deal, but tell me the vision."

Salazar-Zamora had a strong track record when it came to delivering on her plans, Pratt said. Both she and several board members—including Pratt— had relatively long tenures in their positions in the district, which had allowed them to forge a trusting relationship and shared vision for CTE, he said.

Pratt knew Salazar-Zamora could leverage the property to meet her vision in large part because she has always been a magnet for talent.

"She leads with her heart. Somebody who handles her business and leads with her heart is rare," Pratt said. That's typically the type of person hard-working and visionary people are drawn to work for, he added.

On a recent December morning, Salazar-Zamora stood inside a cavernous warehouse on the Tomball Innovation Center site, surveying the space that holds a crane and two small, gutted planes propped up on wood pallets and jacks.

She was dressed in a festive red skirt with matching purse, necklace, and Christmas bauble earrings. Her high-heeled, snake-skin boots—also bright red—lent a few additional inches to her five foot, nine inch frame. The outfit made her both imposing and cheery, a pairing of traits that likely helps Salazar-Zamora get a lot of what she wants for her district.

With a sweep of her hand, Salazar-Zamora described how the hanger would soon be filled with students working on planes as part of the district's new aviation-maintenance program.

Not everyone in the community has been thrilled with the district's plans for the purchase. Some parents questioned whether the old industrial site was safe for students, according to local news stories at the time. The district worked with environmental experts to ensure the site's safety.

Tomball ISD could not have afforded the purchase if it hadn't been for the bankruptcy sale, Salazar-Zamora conceded. Which is why she was so keen to jump at the rare opportunity.

"There are moments in a career when you know in your heart this is right," Salazar-Zamora said. "I call this a legacy purchase."

The move exemplifies her approach to leadership. She thinks big, colleagues say, and she doesn't take no for an answer.

Salazar-Zamora's leadership was shaped by childhood challenges

Those are attributes forged during Salazar-Zamora's childhood as she navigated the world as a child with profound hearing loss. Her mother insisted she never let her disability stop her.

"I was raised with a very simple mantra, and that was to never let my disability be an inability," said Salazar-Zamora, who had an operation at age 17 to repair her hearing.

Her mother "reminded me [of that] when I thought something was too hard. When I didn't think I could be in band," said Salazar-Zamora, 59. "And then I fought hard and made it into the band."

Salazar-Zamora went on to start her education career as a teacher and speech and language pathologist.

Her upbringing also influenced her focus on CTE. Salazar-Zamora was raised in a poor, rural community, she said, where trade skills were as much a pathway to the American dream as a college degree. Since then, three decades in education has crystalized Salazar-Zamora's belief that CTE is necessary to help every child to find a sense of belonging and motivation.

It was that belief that led Salazar-Zamora to invest so heav-

ily in Tomball's CTE facilities, after being promoted from the district's chief academic officer to its superintendent in 2017.

Top-notch facilities can help recruit top-notch CTE teachers

The land purchase has helped Tomball tackle some of the biggest challenges facing CTE programs nationwide.

According to an October EdWeek Research Center survey of educators whose jobs are connected to CTE, a lack of facilities, funding, and teachers are among the most-cited factors holding their programs back.

"I hear principals and district administrators say over and over again that 'we would love to offer this program. We just don't have the space,'" said Walter Ecton, an assistant professor at the Center for the Study of Higher and Post-Secondary Education at the University of Michigan.

And when it comes to hiring teachers, schools end up in an often unwinnable competition with the private sector. Many of the industries that fall under the CTE umbrella pay their employees more than public schools can, Ecton said.

(Ecton spoke with Education Week as a general expert on CTE—he is not familiar with Tomball ISD's program specifically.)

Even after successfully hiring teachers, districts struggle to retain them, said Mark Bosher, the senior director of technical assistance and training for the Career and Technical Association of Texas.

Teachers coming straight from industry face a steep learning curve in mastering the instructional side of the job.

Tomball ISD's investments in professional development for its CTE teachers have been important to retention and program growth, said Bosher whose organization has recognized the district for its CTE work.

"Too many times we hire teachers and tell them, here's your chalk, I'll see you in December," Bosher said. "That's not what Tomball ISD does. They are constantly training their [teachers] and helping them to grow as professionals. That leadership comes from the top. A superintendent has to be invested in that or it doesn't happen."

The Tomball Innovation Center itself is also a powerful draw for new teachers, said Lee Wright, the assistant superintendent of human talent for the district.

"Nobody else has the headquarters of a former oil company," said Wright. "Just having this site, we can recruit—and not just recruit but retain."

That was certainly the case with aviation instructor Justin Morrison, who started teaching at the district three years ago.

Shortly before winter break, Morrison watched over a pair of students' shoulders as they practiced landing in a large flight simulator that looks like a futuristic stagecoach. The contraption, manufactured by Redbird Flight Simulators—an industry leader— is made up of a white metal box, its interior is outfitted with two seats, an instrument panel, and several screens positioned to look like cockpit windows. Its body rests on a red metal base that mimics the movements of a plane.

The screens showed mountain peaks in the distance poking out of cloud tops as the students—one acting as a pilot and the other as the co-pilot—descended into the clouds, losing all visibility. With a beeping sound, the red base shook, simulating light turbulence.

Eventually, a runway lined with lights materialized on the screen. "You just have to work on the outer line …" Morrison said as the plane touched down, "and staying on the runway," he added, as the students veered off it into the grass.

"And that's why we have simulators," Morrison concluded.

Morrison moved from Oklahoma, and he said he turned down other job offers to take the position in Tomball.

Tomball, he said, "really wanted to invest in this program, whereas other districts didn't have that same vision, didn't seem like they had that passion for growing this aviation pathway. And that drew me in immediately."

Tomball is located in a rapidly expanding community outside Houston, near two major commercial airports and several smaller ones, so there is a demand for pilots and mechanics, said Salazar-Zamora. She meets quarterly with community leaders, including the mayor, the city manager, and the local chamber of commerce to keep a finger on the pulse of the area's employment needs.

It's important for CTE programs to offer pathways that have clear connections to careers after high school, said the University of Michigan's Ecton. High-quality programs also have strong relationships with local industry and employers, he said, and evolve to stay aligned with workforce needs as the economy changes.

CTE facilities can double as a revenue source for cash-strapped districts

While research on the long-term benefits of CTE programs on students' future earnings is still emerging, CTE programs can help keep students engaged in their schooling, Ecton said.

"Students do better when they know what outcome they're working toward," he said. "I think especially for students who are struggling to figure out where they see themselves

in the future, CTE can be really useful."

For Kaighly Davis, a junior in Tomball ISD, enrolling in the legal-studies pathway has eased her stress over her postsecondary plans.

The future beyond high school can be overwhelming. Getting to experiment and learn about potential careers in high school makes her next step feel less inscrutable, she said.

"In this program, you're able to figure out if this is really what you want to do for the rest of your life, because that's something that's very scary for high schoolers," said Kaighly, who plans to become a lawyer.

The Tomball Innovation Center has also become a source of income for the district. The district rents out the agriculture arena and the former executive conference room for events.

Law-enforcement agencies have paid to train with the district's virtual simulators used by students in that pathway. And an energy-technology company, Backer Hughes, now leases office space in one of the buildings, which generates around $1.3 million a year for Tomball ISD.

The district still relies on federal dollars from the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education grant program and its own general fund to support CTE, but those additional dollars help.

Salazar-Zamora acknowledges that most districts won't have the opportunity to purchase an oil-services company property in bankruptcy.

But she doesn't see that as the takeaway here.

Instead, Salazar-Zamora urges district leaders in these tight budgetary times to think like entrepreneurs.

Invest in your students, your people, and your community relationships, and the work will pay dividends, Salazar-Zamora said.

"We want for every child to find a place to belong, a passion to pursue, and a love for learning that serves them well beyond the years they are with us," she said. "No superintendent could ever accomplish this kind of work without an incredible team. And my school board has been supportive of any and every crazy idea I've ever come up with, which yes, did include, 'I really think we need to buy an oil and gas company.'"

The next chapter of Oklahoma City's growth

Christy Gillenwater, President & CEO, Greater Oklahoma City Chamber

For decades, Oklahoma City has made intentional investments designed to strengthen our economy, improve quality of life and position our community for long-term growth.

Those investments have transformed our city.

Today, Oklahoma City continues attracting new businesses, welcoming new residents and creating opportunities across a wide range of industries. As our economy grows and evolves, one thing is becoming increasingly clear: sustaining this momentum will require an equally intentional investment in people. Just as MAPS 4 continues to invest in the infrastructure and quality-of-life amenities that support Oklahoma City's future, we must also invest in developing the talent needed to drive our economy forward.

Talent has become one of the most important drivers of regional competitiveness.

Employers across industries need workers with the skills necessary to succeed in a rapidly changing economy. At the same time, improving educational outcomes and creating clearer pathways from learning to careers will be critical to ensuring more Oklahomans can participate in and benefit from our region's continued growth.

No single institution can address these challenges alone. Preparing students and learners for future opportunities requires strong partnerships among schools, CareerTech centers, colleges and universities, employers, workforce organizations and community partners. It also requires an understanding that education, workforce and community systems are deeply connected.

For many students and families, navigating pathways from education to careers can be complicated. Transportation, childcare, limited career awareness and difficulty navigating available programs can create barriers that make it harder for learners to access opportunities and connect education to future careers. These challenges can also affect employers working to build the talent pipelines needed to support continued growth.

Addressing these challenges will require collaboration. Fortunately, collaboration has long been one of Oklahoma City's greatest strengths.

Time and again, our community has demonstrated what is possible when public, private and nonprofit partners work together around shared goals. From MAPS to regional economic development initiatives, collaboration has helped shape Oklahoma City's growth and position our region for future success.

That same spirit of partnership is guiding the Greater Oklahoma City Chamber's work with CivicLab.

Through this effort, educators, employers, workforce organizations and community leaders are coming together to better understand where barriers exist, identify what is working and explore opportunities to foster strategic and system alignment while strengthening education-to-career pathways across Central Oklahoma. The goal is not to create entirely new systems, but to better align the strong assets and partnerships that already exist across our region. Oklahoma City's momentum did not happen by accident. It is the result of decades of vision, partnership and investment.

As we look toward the future, continuing to align education, workforce and community systems will be essential to strengthening our talent pipeline, expanding opportunity and ensuring Oklahoma City remains competitive and prepared for what comes next.

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