

Growing opposition to public education cuts in Oklahoma

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The assault on public education in Oklahoma, side-by-side with years of tax cuts for the rich and giant energy corporations, is being met with growing opposition by teachers and students.

Anger has escalated since February 12, when the state legislature refused to consider a proposal that would have given Oklahoma teachers, who are among the lowest paid in the country, a \$5,000 raise. It would have been the teachers' first raise in ten years.

Protesting teachers descended on the state capitol in Oklahoma to press for improved wages but legislators rejected their demand by a 63-25 vote. The outcome underscored the bankruptcy of the Oklahoma Education Association (OEA) and the Oklahoma City Federation of Teachers, which told educators lobbying and social media campaigns would persuade the corporate-controlled politicians to defend teachers' interests.

Now there is increasing discussion among educators of a statewide strike, despite the fact Oklahoma law forbids teachers from withholding their labor.

On the page of one Facebook group called Oklahoma Teachers United, organizers are encouraging teachers to work with others in their schools to call in sick on the same day. Meanwhile, a teacher in Tulsa public schools, Teresa Danks, is circulating a petition seeking support for a statewide teacher walkout to demand a \$10,000 raise.

Attempting to preempt the threat of independent action by teachers, some school administrators are pondering imposing temporary school closures to compel the legislature to provide increased funding, a tactic last used in Oklahoma in 1990. On Monday, February 19, a discussion of such closures drew an overflow crowd to a school board meeting in Bartlesville, a city of 37,000 people in northeastern Oklahoma.

Students are solidarizing themselves with teachers. At Edison Preparatory School in Tulsa, youth organized a walkout on Wednesday, February 14, bearing signs that read, "Teachers Please Stay." One student carried a small sign reading, "We love our teachers and our school. Disrespecting us isn't cool!"

Just south of Tulsa, in the small community of Kiefer, students walked out on Friday, February 16, in support of a teacher pay raise. Organizer Skyler Smith, a freshman, told KJRH news, "Kids in our generation right now are the future. I'm sure teachers couldn't be happy with the money they are making."

Public education in Oklahoma has been gutted in recent years. According to a January report by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Oklahoma has cut per capita student funding by 28.2 percent over the last decade—the most drastic decline in the country. Neighboring Texas is second, with 16.2 percent in per capita student funding cuts over the same period.

Taking inflation and health care costs into account, Oklahoma teachers have suffered a staggering decline in pay over the past ten years. Lilli Lyon, who teaches Spanish at West Junior High in Moore, told a reporter she has not received a noticeable raise since she moved from Indiana ten years ago. Comparing her net pay from 2009 to her current net pay, she said, "It's like \$47 more, every two weeks. I mean literally nothing."

Many Oklahoma teachers are voting with their feet—moving away to nearby states where pay is higher. This has forced school districts to extend the use of "emergency certification" to replace departed teachers with those who have little or no training or experience.

The full scope of the teacher exodus is not clear, but according to data from the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, some 32,000 teachers who have left Oklahoma classrooms have maintained their

certification to teach in the state.

The growth in the number of teachers certified under emergency provisions has been dramatic. In a “Fast Facts” publication on the state’s education website, it was revealed that in 2011-12, Oklahoma certified only 32 teachers under these provisions. Only five years later, between July and December 2017, the state has already certified 1,851 teachers on an emergency basis.

Superintendent Chuck McCauley of Bartlesville lost five teachers to Kansas last year, forcing him to hire emergency-certified teachers for the present year. “We really are at a tipping point,” he said. “We are hiring people we wouldn’t have even interviewed just a few years ago because there aren’t more qualified applicants. Bottom line, that’s impacting kids and it’s below the standard of what’s expected in our community.”

Decreasing budgets have had drastic consequences for students, with cuts most often directed at music, art, foreign languages, and extra-curricular activities.

Over 100 school districts in the state have gone to a four-day class schedule to cut maintenance and transportation costs. This negatively impacts education, and also blocks many students’ access to their only proper meal in a day. In the town of Newcastle, one fourth-grader told the *Washington Post*, “Going to school four days a week is both good and bad. The good part is we have more time with our families, and the bad part is some people don’t get to eat.”

The newspaper reported that in one town, Macomb, where 88 percent of students qualify for subsidized meals, superintendent Matthew Riggs told the school board he could not “in good conscience” continue with four-day school weeks when some students would be going hungry. The board voted to move back to the five-day week, despite the increased costs.

More and more campuses are closing entirely, forcing students to bus to nearby schools. When officials in the town of Hartford told students in January 2018, that they were closing down the schools due to lack of funding, one mother, Keely Brown, told a television reporter, “Most of the parents found out on Facebook. We’ve been hearing about it for years...and it’s always here, so you think it’s not ever going to happen. But, it’s happening. They’re shutting down.”

In Ponca City, in the northwestern part of the state, the superintendent, David Pennington, expressed

despair. “I can’t even remember the last time we sat down and talked about what can we do that’s good for kids,” he said. “Our conversations are what are we going to cut next?”

While public education has been starved, Oklahoma’s rich have engorged themselves.

Over the last few years, taxes were sharply reduced under Republican Governor Mary Fallin who has boasted of her close ties to big business. The gross production tax on new oil and gas wells has been reduced by 70 percent since 2015, while the income tax for those in the highest bracket was slashed by 25 percent between 2009 and 2016.

The effect of these two revenue losses alone has cost the state about \$1.5 billion annually—about two-thirds of the state’s entire K-12 education budget.



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