

February 2017

In October, I wrote about the challenges we face as a state to recruit and retain the best possible teachers for the classroom. I still expect Oklahoma to rank last in teacher pay later this spring when those statistics are compiled. In the summer of 2015, University of Oklahoma President David Boren and some others commissioned polling to determine the source of revenue dedicated to education that voters in Oklahoma would support. This poll was conducted by a highly respected polling firm and their conclusion was Oklahomans would support a sales tax increase that was dedicated to education. We all know that effort failed during the general election in November, 2016. Opponents touted other solutions such as using one time funds to pay for a salary increase. This strategy is similar to selling the furniture in your house in order to pay for your rent or mortgage. Eventually, you run out of furniture and have nowhere to sleep! Ultimately, this suggestion by self-proclaimed fiscal conservatives is actually fiscally irresponsible. Unfortunately, no alternatives were proposed by the opposition. Financial support for the opposition of the state question has been recently revealed. The largest contributors to defeat the state question were the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce and a group it leads with \$431,139 contributed. Major Oklahoma energy sector companies such as Chesapeake, Continental and Devon also donated \$20,000 each. Their donations proved fruitful as the measure was defeated at the polls.

Our Governor, in the recent State of the State Address, proposed widespread tax reform including a massive overhaul of sales tax collections. With this proposal, she advocates for a \$1,000 teacher salary increase. She also called once again for the consolidation of schools or services as a method to improve the efficiency of education in our state. Opponents of increasing public school funding routinely point to the high number of school districts our state has chosen to fund as a financial inefficiency. Many of the same public education opponents mention school choice as a solution. Essentially, they are advocating for charter schools (creating more schools) while closing public schools. This debate is quickly turning into a rural vs. urban vs. suburban issue which is splintering school supporters into different factions. Obviously, the principle of divide and conquer is alive and well in this scenario. Since 2000, Oklahoma has eliminated 31 school districts through either annexation or consolidation. During the same time period, as a state, we have ADDED 33 charter public schools. A charter public school receives public funds for operation but lacks the regulations under which public schools operate. They are also not required to offer services to students if the needs of that student extend beyond what the school chooses to provide. This is quite different than Guthrie Public Schools because we provide services to all students that walk through our doors. Regardless of the arrangement in this shell game, the funding is still not there.

Proponents of consolidation often point to Kansas which has 286 school districts for the states' almost 500,000 students. Oklahoma currently has 513 districts for just over 680,000 students. Oklahoma now has 34 public charter schools compared to 10 in Kansas. Per pupil funding by our neighbors to the North is \$2,245 higher than Oklahoma. In order to reach the funding level children in Kansas receive, Oklahoma would have to dedicate over \$2.1 billion more to education annually. Reducing the number of school districts has not allowed for an increase in what we spend on each child in Oklahoma and

some of that can be traced to the growth of charter schools which receive public funds. Recently, I was informed that an understanding had been reached by legislative and education leaders to agree the statistics provided by the National Center for Education were a reliable measure. While this may sound like a no-brainer, it has actually been a major hurdle to education funding discussions. It seems every organization has their set of numbers and those are used to support their own viewpoint. Maybe now we can have the discussion about the inevitable shell game since we now agree to how much money is under each shell.

Congratulations to Mechelle Helmberger for receiving the 2017 District Teacher of the Year award. We had a record number of businesses express their generosity with gifts for our winners. With the financial challenges we face in education, our teachers appreciate the support shown by the community now more than ever.

Soon, we will open the bids to hopefully begin construction of Charter Oak Elementary. Despite the funding challenges statewide, this is an exciting time in the history of Guthrie Public Schools. We have not built a new school in over 27 years. The work on Central Elementary should be completed this spring with new energy efficient windows. These bond projects are so critical to the future of GPS and we as a district are incredibly thankful for the continued trust and support.