

Oklahoma State Department of Education
2500 N. Lincoln Blvd
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73106

Superintendent Walters and OSDE Board of Education,

I appreciate the time I have been allowed to serve in the Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDE), as well as the efforts and passion reflected by Dr. Thomas Kirk and Todd Loftin in their new positions of leadership. Superintendent Walters, I am genuinely excited about the direction you are advocating to improve education in Oklahoma, and I share your values and aspirations! However, after several months of waiting for improvements within our organization, it has become clear that I cannot be part of this administration. I formally announce my resignation from the position of Program Manager, Grant Development and Compliance, with an effective date of October 23, 2023.

As the Program Manager for Grant Development and Compliance my responsibilities include vital communications with various entities involved in grant applications and compliance programs. Unfortunately, I have encountered significant obstacles that have severely hindered my ability to perform my duties effectively and which my immediate Supervisors are not in positions to remedy. Some of these challenges include:

Lack of Access to Essential Platforms: I have not been granted access or adequate access to essential grant submission and compliance platforms, which are crucial for the proper functioning of my department. I am left unable to see, submit, or interact with grant reporting.

Refusal of Printer for the Grants Office: I have experienced difficulties in accessing basic office equipment, such as a printer in the grant office, which is essential for the smooth operation of my responsibilities. Sharing a hall printer often results in printing jobs being mixed.

Delays in Approvals and Signatures: There have been ongoing delays in obtaining the necessary approvals and signatures from you. These delays not only affect my department but also impede the progress of other departments within the OSDE and, ultimately, have an adverse impact on the districts and students we are here to support.

Reporting on the Grant Office: There have been times you reported on the Grant Office but have yet to speak with me for information regarding our office. How can you report correctly if you do not speak to my Office? I requested several times to speak with you and **you denied** each request.

I arrived at the OSDE with a genuine desire to contribute to the vision of “**a better educational opportunity Oklahoma**” and I **share in your declared belief** that a more “**conservative returning to the roots of a firm foundation**” is what our state needs. While desperately **wanting** to support you, the lack of leadership and availability within our own OSDE is impossible to ignore. Superintendent Walters, your absence, and the refusal to meet with your staff sends a concerning message that **we may not hold value in your eyes**. I hope that this can be attributed to **inexperience** rather than a **personal political agenda** as this would not be in the best interest of Oklahoma's children, teachers, and dedicated OSDE employees. If **your physical presence is not required for leadership**, then the question arises as to **why the position exists** with a salary attached to it. We **need active leadership** to ensure that the OSDE effectively meets the needs of districts and students. You were to be the leader who was in the fight with us – unlike your predecessor who was never here!

I share your **support for school choice** while also advocating for public schools. I **believe educators should be hailed as heroes as they teach our youth to be strong, independent thinkers** while keeping their personal beliefs personal. I believe the Oklahoma Education Association (OEA) has become **a detriment** to Oklahoma's education with their liberal agenda driven attitudes. I also know schools need **dedicated state leadership fully focused** on all of Oklahoma education to guide us back to the essential task of educating our most valuable assets – our kids. I reiterate, I **support** your agenda...however, I am disturbed by your apparent concern to get in front of the public before we secure our house (OSDE) and establish the best way to serve Oklahoma.

My advice, based on my experience as a retired Superintendent who has navigated the challenges of small and large school districts, and worked in an effective State Department of Education, would be to hire more Oklahomans who have direct experience with small rural schools, which constitute 70% of the educational landscape in our state. Their firsthand knowledge of the unique challenges and needs of these schools can be invaluable in shaping effective education policies and initiatives as well as the ability to effectively communicate with those we serve. Also, to appreciate and recognize the dedicated individuals who have stayed the course in our own OSDE and continue to navigate the turbulent currents. Walk among them, know what they are doing so you will not have to ask the department heads, hours before a public meeting, for a list of “shout outs”. Next, please recognize the need of our OSDE to have a leader who is **present**, focusing on the essential task of fortifying our education providers, whether in public or private spheres, and honoring the invaluable contributions of these “boots on the ground”. Also, I suggest being an advocate for Schools while holding them accountable, as this would allow **teachers** and **students** to **retain** their dignity when their weak administration is to blame. And lastly, the book “**Jesus on Leadership**” C. Gene Wilkes would be a great growth resource.

I would have preferred to address these concerns privately, but after being told that you said not to contact you again, this is the only format I had available. I will continue to keep the OSDE, Oklahoma Schools and students in my thoughts and prayers. During my notice period, I am committed to ensuring a seamless transition.

Respectfully,

Pamela Smith-Gordon
Program Manager, Grant Development and Compliance

*“You can’t fix problems if you don’t acknowledge they exist”
Oklahoma State Superintendent, Ryan Walters*