

Better Outcomes for Oklahoma Kids

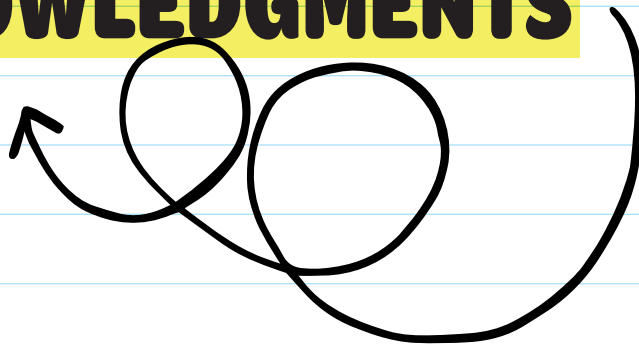
B.O.O.K. 2030

Setting a bold 5-year agenda for Oklahoma Education





ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

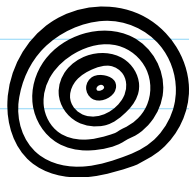


This report is an initiative of Advance Oklahoma's Kids, a statewide coalition of community organizations, education advocates, parents, and educators who believe that our students can't afford to wait for a quality education. We're building a movement in support of equitable funding, fair and just discipline, and equitable outcomes in public education so that our public schools are stronger for the benefit of all Oklahomans.

Oklahoma Appleseed Center for Law and Justice had the lead role in coordinating and leading the B.O.O.K. initiative. Dr. David Blatt, Director of Research and Strategic Impact, drafted this report, and Shelby Bomford, Education Justice Community Organizer, organized the stakeholder input and community forums. They were assisted by: Colleen McCarty, Executive Director; Brent Rowland, Legal Director; Sa-Tae Seth McIntosh, Manager of Community Organizing; Emerson O'Keeffe, Operations Associate; and Zeke Gonzales, Criminal Justice Community Organizer.

We are grateful to Well-Told for help with designing the report and its accompanying materials.

Most importantly, we wish to express our deep appreciation to the hundreds of Oklahomans who contributed their thoughtful opinions and experiences through our public survey, community forums, and one-on-one interviews. Your passion and commitment to public education in Oklahoma and to ensuring better outcomes for the 700,000 students attending public schools was instrumental in shaping the recommendations found in these pages.



BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

THEME #1

Strengthening the Teaching Profession

Recommendation #1:

Commit to Paying Teachers and Support Staff At
Least 90% of the National Average

Recommendation #2:

Boost Pay for Novice Teachers

Recommendation #3:

Incentivize Teachers to Serve in Low-Income Schools

Recommendation #4:

Provide Greater Classroom Support for Teachers

THEME #2

Ensuring Adequate Resources

Recommendation #5:

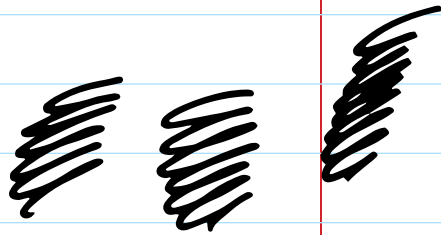
Provide Automatic Inflation Adjustments in State Aid Funding

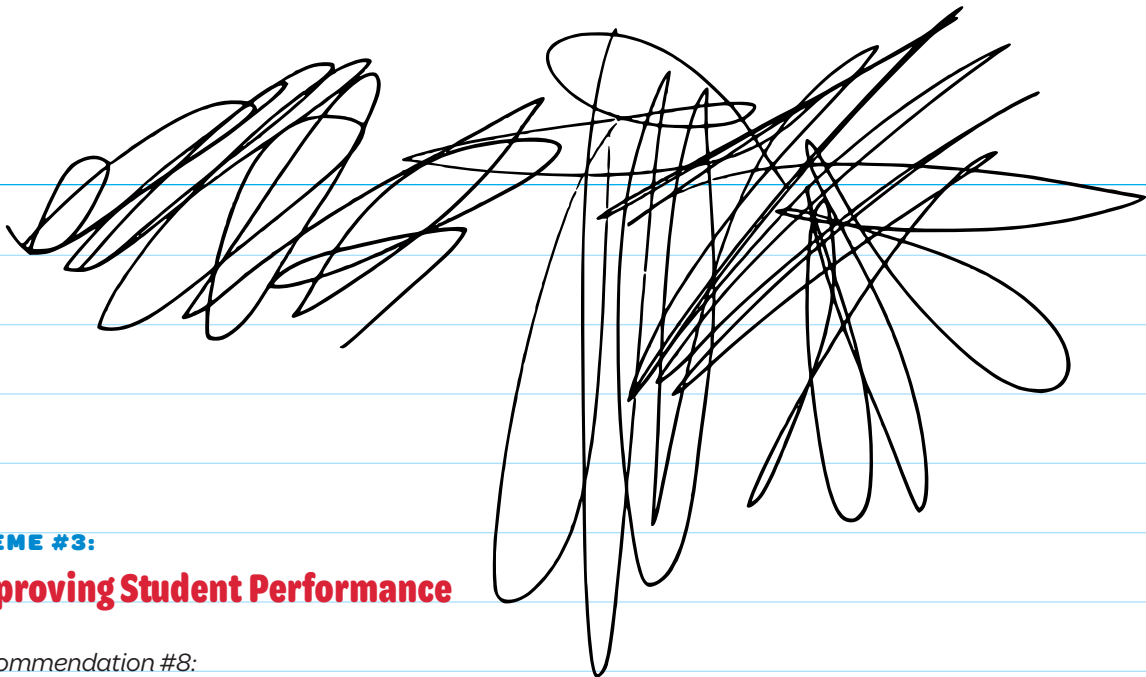
Recommendation #6:

Restore Class Size Limits

Recommendation #7:

Greater Accountability for Private School Choice Programs





THEME #3:

Improving Student Performance

Recommendation #8:

Reduce the Reliance on Standardized Tests

Recommendation #9:

Support Personalized Learner-Centered Education

Recommendation #10:

Bolster Creative Elements of the School Day

THEME #4:

Creating a Safe, Healthy and Supportive School Environment

Recommendation #11:

Increase Resources for Student Mental Health

Recommendation #12:

Promote Community Schools

Recommendation #13:

Support the Use of School-Based Restorative Justice

Recommendation #14:

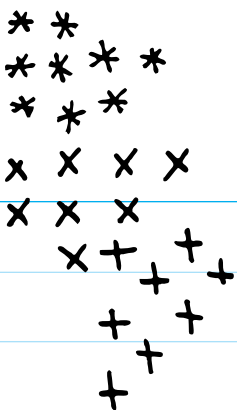
End the Use of School Corporal Punishment

Recommendation #15:

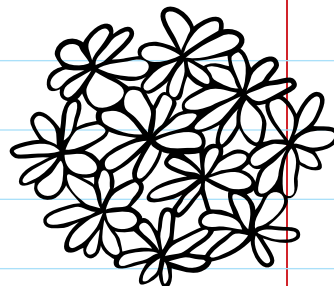
Implement multi-tiered intervention systems to address chronic absenteeism

Recommendation #16:

Provide Healthy Meals At No Cost for All Students



INTRODUCTION



Few people who have followed the news in Oklahoma in recent years would deny that the state's public education system is in serious trouble.

National rankings by organizations such as the Annie E. Casey Foundation (48th),¹ U.S. News (48th),² WalletHub (50th),³ and Education Week (49th)⁴ all place Oklahoma at or near the very bottom among the 50 states for K-12 education. Oklahoma students score between 44th and 49th on national standardized math and reading tests according to the most recent results,⁵ while our per pupil spending ranks us 49th.⁶ School districts across the state struggle to find enough qualified and fully-trained teachers, leading to thousands of classrooms each year being managed by inexperienced teachers with emergency certifications or by adjunct teachers.

Meanwhile, for the past three years, education policy has been distracted and diverted by polarizing debates over such things as Bibles in the classroom, alleged pornography in school libraries and during State Board of Education meetings, and charges that teachers are turning schools into "terrorist training camps."⁷ The culture war politics promoted by the current Superintendent of Instruction, coupled with weak leadership

1 <https://okpolicy.org/kids-count-2025/#:~:text=For%20the%202025%20KIDS%20COUNT,40th%20in%20economic%20well%2Dbeing>

2 <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/oklahoma>

3 <https://wallethub.com/edu/e/states-with-the-best-schools/5335>

4 <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/quality-counts-2021-educational-opportunities-and-performance-in-oklahoma/2021/01>

5 <https://www.kgou.org/education/2025-01-30/oklahoma-ranks-near-the-bottom-for-math-and-reading-scores-according-to-nations-report-card>

6 <https://ies.ed.gov/ies/2025/04/revenues-and-expenditures-public-elementary-and-secondary-education-school-year-2022-23-fiscal-year>

7 Oklahoma Appleseed has created a comprehensive inventory of Superintendent Walters' misdeeds at <https://www.okappleseed.org/ryan-walters-gross-misconduct>

and personal misconduct, has left many supporters of public schools exhausted and demoralized.

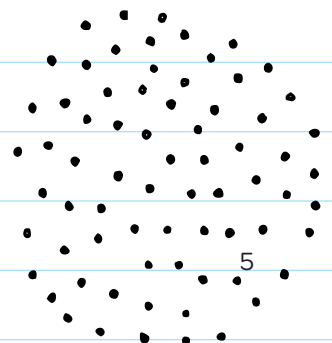
And yet, despite all the genuine challenges and setbacks, **public education in Oklahoma still enjoys some remarkable strengths.** Our early childhood education program for 4-year olds is the envy of the nation, as is our system of career and vocational education. Our children continue to be educated and cared for by dedicated, hard-working, and resilient teachers and support staff. Many of our districts are running innovative programs that provide students with challenging and stimulating learning opportunities.

Just as importantly, across the state, in urban, suburban, and rural areas, **Oklahomans recognize and value public schools as the cornerstone of our communities and the foundation of our democracy.** We believe deeply in schools that serve all children, regardless of national origin, race, income level, or disability status; schools that help break down barriers and create opportunities for our children to become successful students, productive workers, and engaged citizens. Just seven years ago, tens of thousands of Oklahomans rallied behind our public school teachers when they waged a two-week walkout aimed at ensuring higher teacher pay. Even today, behind the divisive headlines, serious policy leaders at the state and local levels are pursuing policies aimed at solving the real challenges facing our schools.

The Better Outcomes for Oklahoma Kids (B.O.O.K.) initiative was launched by the Advance Oklahoma's Kids (AOK) coalition in the fall of 2024, motivated by the belief that we can and must do better for the 700,000-plus children attending our public schools. B.O.O.K. is meant as a way to change the narrative around public education in Oklahoma by bringing a wide range of stakeholders together to celebrate and build on the important successes of our public schools, acknowledge the real problems they face, and recommend a path for meaningful, positive policy change for the years ahead.

This initiative is guided in part by the legacy of House Bill 1017, the landmark education reform legislation enacted in 1990 under the leadership of Republican Governor Henry Bellmon and Democratic legislators.⁸ HB 1017 was bold, sweeping, and forward-looking, and it put public education in Oklahoma on a positive path for many years by introducing such reforms as higher teacher pay, smaller class sizes, full-day kindergarten, school consolidation, and much else.

8 <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1H9BMFP70ywwqDUkr7nkSwgwYKzFJJ9EFi/view?usp=sharing>



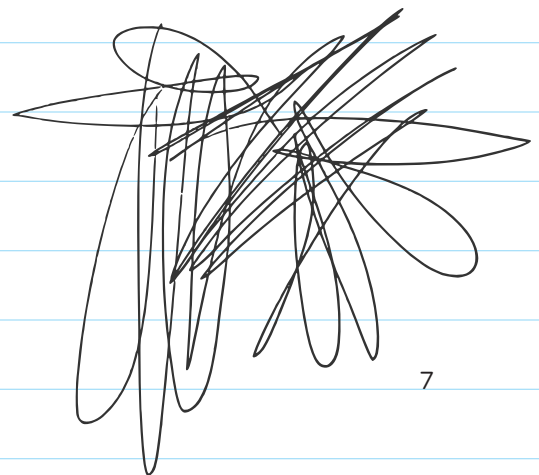


We are now obviously in a very different political moment compared to 1990, but our belief is that there are still Oklahomans willing to roll up their sleeves, put partisan and ideological differences aside, and work to develop an education agenda not just for next year but for the next five and ten years.

To develop a policy agenda that will lead to better outcomes for Oklahoma kids, the Advance Oklahoma's Kids coalition, led by the team at Oklahoma Appleseed Center for Law and Justice, embarked on a months-long process of stakeholder input and consultation. We conducted an online survey where over 250 citizens shared their thoughts on the major strengths and challenges of public education and their vision for the future. We then held six 90-minute community listening sessions—in Tulsa, Oklahoma City, Woodward and Ada, as well as two held online—to hear directly from concerned parents, educators, and community members. Finally, we gathered additional insights and information from a series of one-on-one interviews with leading education policymakers and experts.

The result is a set of recommendations we are calling B.O.O.K. 2030 – a policy agenda for the next five years intended to strengthen our schools and produce better outcomes for Oklahoma's kids. Our proposals are intended to be bold and ambitious, yet realistic: all of them reflect policies that have been implemented successfully in other states and/or in school districts here in Oklahoma. While some of the recommendations could be adopted and implemented within a short timeframe, others might need several years to put into effect. Our goal is to see all in place by 2030.

Our 16 recommendations are organized into four major themes that emerged from our stakeholder engagement: 1) Strengthening the Teaching Profession; 2) Ensuring Adequate Resources; 3) Improving Student Performance; and 4) Creating a Safe, Healthy and Supportive School Environment. We should stress that the stakeholders we consulted proposed many worthwhile and creative suggestions for improving public education that we were unable to include in the report.



1

Strengthening the Teaching Profession

In all of our stakeholder engagement, the most consistent message we heard is that Oklahoma teachers and support staff remain a tremendous asset. When asked to identify the strengths of our public schools, survey respondents consistently shared such answers as “committed educators”, “hardworking teachers”, and “highly qualified and loyal educators who diligently work for our students, parents, districts, and communities.”

At the same time, it’s clear that Oklahoma teachers feel overworked, underpaid, and underappreciated. The result has been a steady exodus of experienced teachers from the classroom, and a growing struggle to fill the teacher pipeline with new recruits. One legislator we spoke with noted that the state now has seven emergency certified and adjunct teachers for every new four-year graduate with a teaching degree.

Finding ways to support the teaching profession has been the focus of multiple task forces, working groups, and studies over the years.⁹ This past session, legislators approved a bill that provides matching funds to school districts to help paraprofessionals and other staff members earn teaching degrees and certifications,¹⁰ and another that makes the children of most teachers with at least 10 years of experience eligible for the Oklahoma Promise college scholarship program.¹¹ Education officials and legislators are increasingly embracing the Oklahoma Teacher Empowerment Program, allowing districts to designate up to 10% of their teaching staff with an advanced, lead, or master certificate accompanied by annual stipends of \$3,000 - \$10,000, as a promising way to reward the highest-performing teachers.¹²

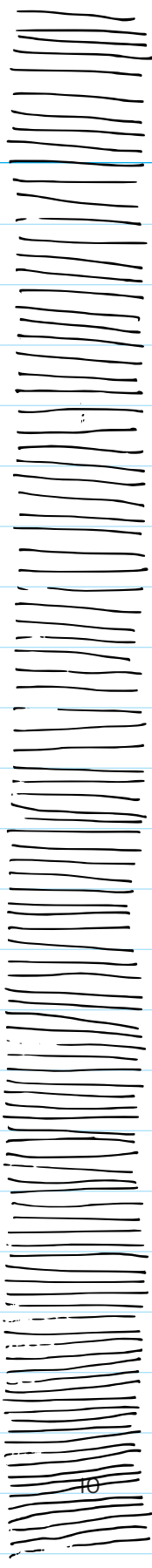
Still, if Oklahoma hopes to make real inroads on tackling the teacher shortage and ensuring that every student is being taught by qualified, well-trained, and effective teachers, then more needs to be done. We offer the following recommendations to help support the teaching profession

9 For example, see <https://oklahoma.gov/content/dam/ok/en/osde/documents/services/teacher-year/teacher-leadership-development/Prelim-report.pdf>

10 <https://www.oklegislature.gov/BillInfo.aspx?Bill=SB235&Session=2500>

11 <https://www.oklegislature.gov/BillInfo.aspx?Bill=HB%201727&Session=2500>

12 <https://oklahoma.gov/education/divisions/teacher-recruitment-retention/teacher-induction-program1/oklahoma-teacher-empowerment-program.html>



RECOMMENDATION #1

Commit to Paying Teachers and Support Staff At Least 90% of the National Average

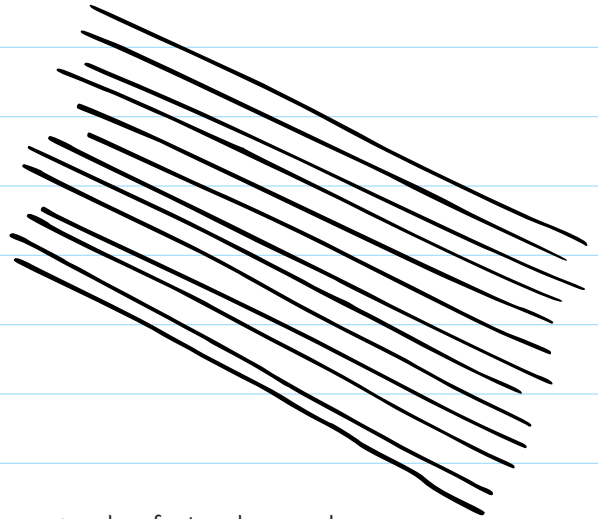
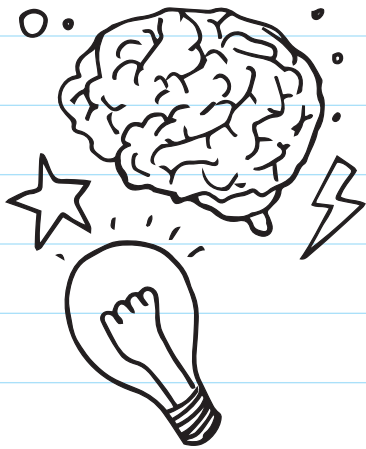
Oklahoma legislators have now approved two major pay raises, along with one smaller one, in the last nine years. These actions followed a long stretch, “the forgotten decade” of 2009–2017 when Oklahoma’s teacher salary schedule remained frozen and the state’s average teacher compensation fell to 49th in the nation. The average teacher salary in Oklahoma in 2024 was \$61,330, which includes the value of health and retirement benefits. This ranks Oklahoma 35th in the nation, almost 15% below the national average of \$72,030, according to the annual survey published by the NEA.¹³

If Oklahoma has made progress in bringing teacher pay somewhat closer to the national average, the same cannot be said for educational support professionals, a designation that includes paraprofessionals, clerical workers, custodians, and others. The average full-time support worker in Oklahoma earns just \$27,656, according to the most recent NEA survey, placing Oklahoma dead last among the 50 states and DC and a full 25% below the national average.¹⁴ Only once in the last decades have Oklahoma legislators approved a pay raise targeted for support professionals.

Despite their recent raises, Oklahoma teachers continue to earn far less than other workers with college degrees. The Economic Policy Institute regularly reports on the

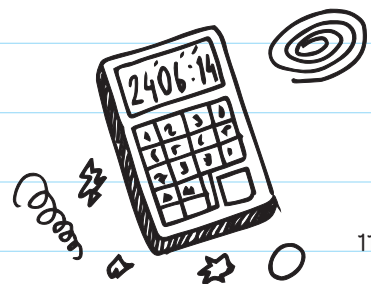
¹³ <https://www.nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/state-teacher-pay>

¹⁴ <https://www.nea.org/sites/default/files/2025-04/2025-esp-earnings-report-final.pdf>



“teacher wage penalty”—the difference between the average salary for teachers and other college-educated workers. EPI reported that Oklahoma teachers made 31% less than other workers with college degrees in—the fourth highest teacher wage penalty in the nation, behind only Arizona, Virginia and Colorado,. Across the United States, the teacher wage penalty has increased dramatically over recent decades, from just 6.6% in 1996 to 24.6% in 2022.¹⁵

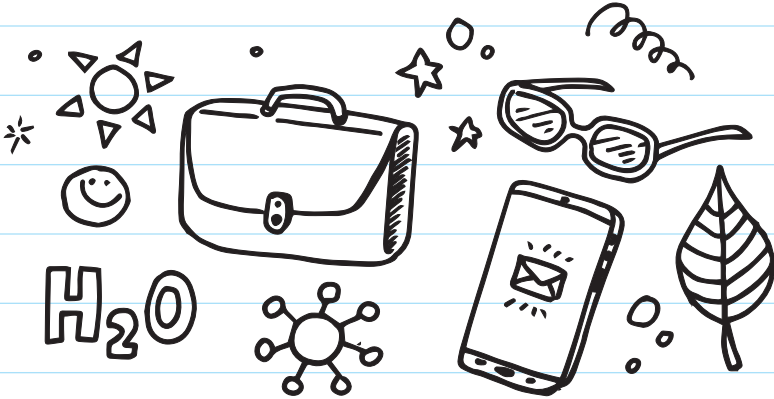
Oklahoma legislators should commit to a concrete plan to ensure pay increases for teachers and support workers until Oklahoma reaches and stays at at least 90% of the national average. As other states will likely increase educator pay in future years as well, this will be a moving target. Given that Oklahoma does enjoy a lower cost of living than many states, it is reasonable to set the target at less than 100% of the national average; however, making a firm commitment to raise salaries for teachers and support staff will send an important signal that the state is serious about ensuring that our education professionals are valued and paid competitively.



¹⁵ <https://www.epi.org/publication/teacher-pay-in-2022/> EPI uses pooled data from 2017-2022 to ensure adequate sample size

RECOMMENDATION #2

Boost Pay for Novice Teachers



In looking at teacher pay, starting salaries are especially important for recruiting new teachers into the profession, but so are the opportunities for pay increases as teachers gain additional years of experience. Thanks to the across-the-board pay raises approved by the Legislature in recent years, Oklahoma's minimum salary for a first-year teacher is now close to \$40,000 a year for someone with a Bachelor's degree on a standard 10-month contract.¹⁶ However, most annual step increases are less than \$500 per year.

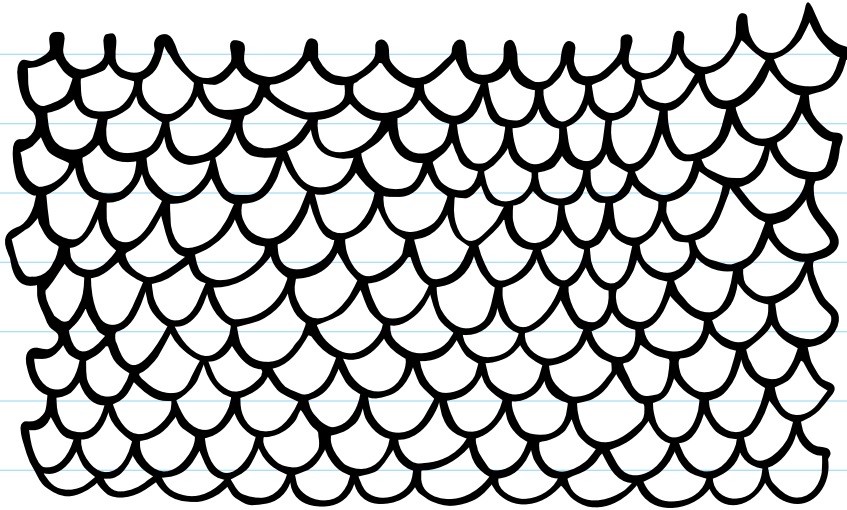
The Legislature in 2025 acted to encourage the state's most experienced teachers to stay on the job longer by passing legislation that will provide annual step increases for teachers through their 35th year teaching, rather than topping out after 25 years.¹⁷ However, that leaves unaddressed a problem that was highlighted in a major study of the teacher shortage in Oklahoma conducted by University of Tulsa professor Matthew Hendricks in 2015.¹⁸ He found that Oklahoma's teacher attrition rates were highest among novice teachers in their first several years of teaching, which is just when teachers are gaining valuable experience and becoming most productive and effective.

Hendricks noted that in the private sector, salaries tend to increase rapidly early in a worker's career and level off in later years." By contrast, Oklahoma's teacher salary

¹⁶ <https://oklahoma.gov/content/dam/ok/en/careertech/educators/agricultural-education/program-funding/Salary%20minimums%202024-2025.pdf>

¹⁷ <https://www.oklegislature.gov/BillInfo.aspx?Bill=hb1087&Session=2500>

¹⁸ https://okpolicy.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/Teacher_Pay_FINAL_revised.pdf



schedule is quite flat for teachers early in their careers, offering larger annual increases only for those in their 10th and 15th years.

Prof. Hendricks argued that the more efficient salary schedule is concave-shaped: it is “steep initially, offering large salary increases each year to novice teachers, and is relatively flat for higher experience teachers.” This structure, he argued, would help retain mid-career professionals, who have been shown to be both “highly responsive to changes in teacher salaries and... near the apex of their productivity.”

We heard similar claims from our stakeholders. One district Superintendent told us that the problem he encounters with teacher pay is not the starting salary; rather it’s that the current salary schedule doesn’t make it advantageous for teachers to stay. He strongly recommends stretching out the pay scale to reward teachers who have been in the profession longer. Another close observer of education issues stated that to boost teacher retention, there should be larger step raises for teachers after, say, three, five and ten years.

We propose that in conjunction with the pay increases included as part of recommendations #1 and #3, the Legislature should revise the salary schedule to ensure larger increases for novice teachers. The specific amounts should be guided by additional research on how the salary structure should be optimized to boost teacher retention and ensure that early and mid-career teachers remain competitive with their peers in other sectors.

RECOMMENDATION #3

Incentivize Teachers to Serve in Low-Income Schools

Anyone familiar with the teaching profession knows that while the job is always challenging, the challenges tend to be much greater in some schools compared to others. In particular, teachers in schools with high concentrations of low-income students must manage higher levels of chronic absenteeism, student turnover, and disciplinary issues, as well as lower student performance.

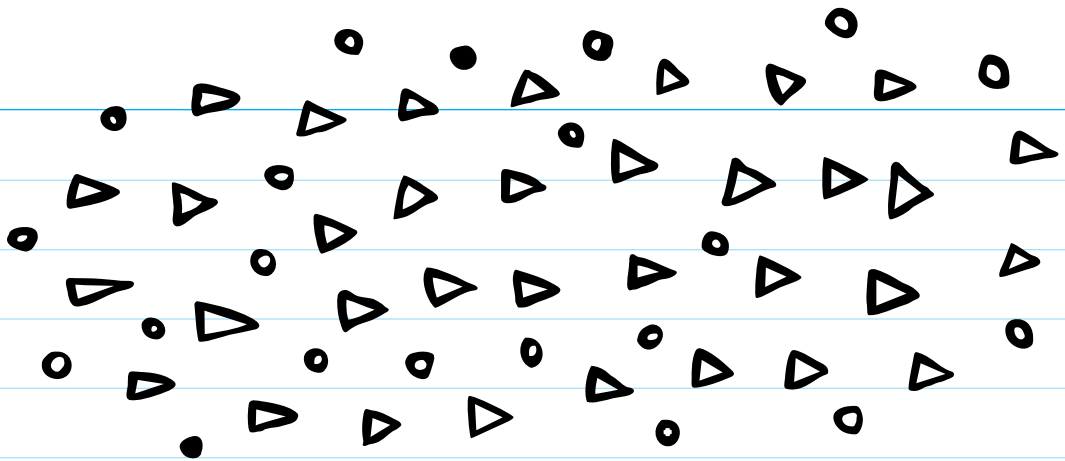
Keeping high-quality teachers in high-poverty schools is at once more urgent and more difficult. It is well-established that the presence of experienced and effective teachers in high-poverty schools can significantly narrow the achievement gap and improve long-term outcomes for students.¹⁹ At the same time, high-poverty schools are staffed by less experienced teachers and suffer higher turnover than more affluent ones.²⁰ One study found that 27% of teachers in Oklahoma schools with the highest share of low-income students had three years of teaching experience or less, compared to 19% of inexperienced teachers in schools with higher-income students.²¹

Several of our B.O.O.K. stakeholders recognized this problem and identified higher pay for teachers in high-poverty schools as part of the solution. **“Anytime you expect a teacher to go into a situation that will involve more stress, more work, you’re going to have to pay them more,”** one district administrator told us. A Republican legislative leader referred to his experience in the business world “where it’s a pretty normal concept that you have to pay people more to work in places around the world that are harder to fill.”

19 <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/leandro-high-poverty-schools-brief#:~:text=Prior%20research%20has%20established%20that%20access%20to,turnover%20are%20associated%20with%20higher%20student%20performance.&text=Set%20a%205%2Dyear%20goal%20of%20reducing%20less%2Dthan%2Dfully,years%20of%20experience%20to%20less%20than%2010%25.>

20 https://okpolicy.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/Teacher_Pay_FINAL_revised.pdf

21 <https://okpolicy.org/study-shows-higher-teacher-pay-ease-teacher-shortage-boost-student-outcomes/>



Nationally, one recent study found that half of surveyed school districts offer incentives to teachers to teach in high-need schools and that differentiated compensation for teachers in high-need schools has increased 20 percentage points since 2017.²² Prof. Hendricks, in his 2015 study, determined that teacher salaries in low-income schools would have to be 55% – 65% higher than in other schools to equalize teacher turnover rates.²³ However, other research suggests that a bonus of roughly \$5,000 annually for the average teacher in the United States, is most effective for recruiting and retaining teachers in critical areas.²⁴

As with our previous recommendation, more research may be needed to determine the optimal way to adjust the teacher salary structure to ensure that more of our students in schools with the highest concentration of poverty are being taught by the best teachers. Options might include providing loan forgiveness for teachers who work in high-poverty schools for a certain number of years; tying base pay in part to a school's socio-economic profile; and/or providing bonuses for teachers who agree to transfer to a high-needs school.²⁵ Whatever the specific solution, it is clear that narrowing the achievement gap and ensuring that our public schools provide the best possible education for all children regardless of their zip code should be a strong focus of education policymakers in the years ahead.

22 <https://www.nctq.org/research-insights/more-districts-are-paying-teachers-strategically-to-meet-critical-needs-is-yours/>

23 https://okpolicy.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/Teacher_Pay_FINAL_revised.pdf

24 <https://www.nctq.org/research-insights/more-districts-are-paying-teachers-strategically-to-meet-critical-needs-is-yours/>

25 Currently, teachers who qualify for stipends under the Oklahoma Teacher Empowerment Program can receive an additional stipend of \$1,000 - \$5,000 if they teach in an economically-disadvantaged school. However, the program only serves up to 10% of a district's teachers in districts that choose to participate and awards are for only one year at a time. <https://www.ossba.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Oklahoma-Teacher-Empowerment-Program-updated-July-2024.pdf>

RECOMMENDATION #4

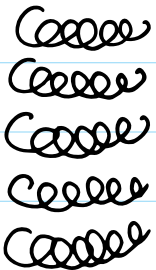
Provide Greater Classroom Support for Teachers

Increasing teacher pay is one component of what's needed to support teachers, but it is not sufficient. Throughout our B.O.O.K. consultations, we heard over and over that teachers feel overburdened by their workload and range of responsibilities, and that too many teachers are not receiving the support they need to be successful. These concerns affect teacher morale and contribute directly to the decision that far too many teachers make to choose a different line of work.

There is no silver bullet that will solve these issues. We heard dozens of worthwhile suggestions, with mentorships being one theme that was raised frequently..

With so many Oklahoma teachers joining the profession each year under emergency certifications, the need for newer teachers to enjoy the guidance and experience of more seasoned colleagues is especially important. One of our survey respondents recommends bringing back mentor teachers who get paid to help the new teacher in their first year. In our Tulsa listening session, one participant suggested that teachers can review other teachers as peers, while another suggested universal coaching and mentorship that is subject specific. Similarly, a participant in Woodward suggested pairing a career teacher with a new teacher in the same subject area for guidance and information sharing.

While districts may choose different approaches to mentoring based on what best meets local needs and circumstances, the Legislature can encourage mentorships by providing a dedicated funding stream that all districts are eligible for. One program currently operated by Oklahoma State University, OK-Thrive, supports early career educators with professional development and coaching, but in its first full cycle has only been able to serve 80 teachers in 25 school districts.²⁶ Mentorships could also be a specific component of the Oklahoma Teacher Empowerment Program that offers annual stipends to teachers recognized as among the best in their district.²⁷



²⁶ <https://education.okstate.edu/outreach/ok-thrive/>

²⁷ <https://oklahoma.gov/education/divisions/teacher-recruitment-retention/teacher-induction-program1/oklahoma-teacher-empowerment-program.html>



2

Ensuring Adequate Resources

When looking at school funding, there are two major dimensions on which states are typically measured: overall funding levels and the formulas by which funds are allocated across districts.

The good news for Oklahoma is that national education funding experts and local stakeholders alike consider Oklahoma to have an excellent school funding formula. The formula has strong provisions that help equalize funding between wealthier and poorer school districts, and also includes sensible weighting mechanisms based on a district's mix of students' grade levels, disability status, transportation needs, and other factors.²⁸ Although the funding formula might need some tweaks, this does not appear to be an area in need of major reform.

The same, however, is not true of our overall funding commitment. "Oklahoma's funding formula generally has the right kinds of components. The problem is that money isn't going into it," one stakeholder bluntly asserted. This assessment is borne out by the data: Oklahoma ranks 48th in per pupil funding according to the 2025 report from Education Data; the \$11,916 in funding per student is a full third (32.7 percent) below the national average of \$17,700.²⁹ Other reports produce similar findings and give Oklahoma the lowest possible grades for fiscal effort.³⁰

Increased funding for public schools is an essential component of the effort to ensure better outcomes for Oklahoma kids. We propose three recommendations in this area aimed at ensuring annual increases in the state funding formula, smaller class sizes, and greater accountability for public dollars that are being used for students in private schools.

28 For a detailed overview of Oklahoma's funding formula, see <http://funded.edbuild.org/state/OK>

29 <https://educationdata.org/public-education-spending-statistics#ok>

30 <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/state-grades-on-school-finance-2021-map-and-rankings/2021/06>





RECOMMENDATION #5

Provide Automatic Inflation Adjustments in State Aid Funding

While Oklahoma schools must grapple annually with the higher cost of doing business that results from inflation and new mandates and responsibilities, the Legislature has been very inconsistent in allocating additional funds for K-12 education.

Oklahoma schools are funded primarily through the state aid formula, which allocates a basic amount per student, that is then adjusted according to various weights. Between 1992 and 2009, per pupil state aid increased every year but one and increased overall from \$2,085 to \$3,275, a healthy average annual rate of growth of 2.8%. However, over the next nine years, as the Legislature failed over and over again to provide increases in education funding, per pupil state aid fell seven times and increased only twice; **by 2018, state aid was stuck at \$3,032 per student, which was \$240 per pupil less than it was in 2009.**³¹

School funding has improved significantly since ‘the lost decade’ of 2009-2017, with per pupil state aid in 2024 up by over one-third compared to 2018. However, as we’ve seen, Oklahoma still ranks at or near the very bottom in per pupil funding, and education advocates continue to be concerned that school funding will be frozen or fail to increase by the amounts needed to ensure public school districts have the resources to educate their students.

One promising and relatively straightforward solution is to provide for annual inflation-based adjustments. At least eight states—Arizona, Colorado, Iowa, Massachusetts, Ohio, North Dakota, South Carolina, and Wyoming—had statutory language that

³¹ Per pupil state aid funding includes both foundation and salary incentive aid factors. <https://oklahoma.gov/content/dam/ok/en/osde/documents/services/state-aid/state-funding-formula/Final%20Formula%20Factors%20-%201992%20-%202024%20-%20web%2007.17.2024.xlsx>



automatically adjusts their finding formulas annually based on inflation, according to one 2005 survey.³²

Most recently, Mississippi—a state that currently ranks slightly ahead of Oklahoma in per pupil spending³³—enacted a new education funding formula that includes an inflation adjustment mechanism. Under the Mississippi Student Funding Formula, passed in 2024 and effective in the 2024-25 school year, the base student funding amount will be increased annually by the 20-year average consumer price index (CPI). Every four years, the base student amount will be recalculated.³⁴ New York’s funding formula also includes annual inflation adjustments, as well as adjustments for student need and regional cost differences.³⁵

Oklahoma legislators should provide for a minimum annual funding increase that takes inflation into account to ensure that schools have the resources they need to maintain teaching and support staff positions and cover higher operating costs. The inflation adjustment should provide a minimum annual increase without precluding larger increases to support special and ongoing initiatives. At the same time, there may also need to be provisions to suspend annual increases during times of revenue shortfalls when state agencies are facing across-the-board cuts.

32 <https://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/57/55/5755.pdf> Colorado's inflation adjustment is in their state constitution.

33 <https://educationdata.org/public-education-spending-statistics>

34 https://www.mdek12.org/sites/default/files/fy25_mississippi_student_formula_funding_07_09_24.pdf

35 <https://files.schoolstatefinance.org/hubfs/Reports/Adjusting%20the%20ECS%20Formula%20for%20Inflation.pdf>

RECOMMENDATION #6

Restore Class Size Limits

Concerns with large class sizes were a common refrain heard from our B.O.O.K. stakeholders. “Class sizes must be small enough where teachers can meaningfully interact with each student,” wrote one of our survey respondents. “It doesn’t matter how great the teacher is, they cannot build relationships or offer individualized education if there are too many students in their classrooms.”

The research on educational outcomes is clear that small class sizes are especially beneficial for students in kindergarten through third grade, and have the greatest impact on low-income students and students of color.³⁶ One review of the educational literature reported that “the positive effects of class size reduction for students of color was about double that of white students, and some researchers expect that these effects could narrow the racial opportunity gap by about one-third.”³⁷

One of the signature achievements of the landmark HB 1017 legislation of 1990 was to reduce class sizes for all grade levels. By 1993-94, classes for students from kindergarten through 6th grade were to have no more than 20 students, while teachers in middle school and high school (grades 7-12) were to be responsible for the instruction of no more than 140 students in any given 6-hour day. Districts in violation of the class size limits would face the loss of their accreditation.³⁸

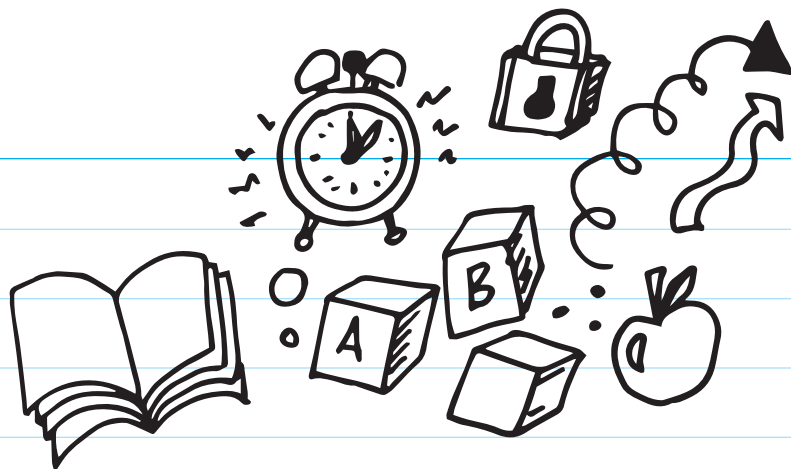
HB 1017 had initial success in reducing class sizes. “Schools went from 40 kids in the classroom to 20-something. It was a very big change,” said one teacher quoted in a 2016 Oklahoman article.³⁹ However, the law allowed school districts to apply for exemptions from class size mandates, and as the state faced budget shortfalls

36 <https://okpolicy.org/beyond-teacher-pay-class-size-matters/>

37 <https://okpolicy.org/beyond-teacher-pay-class-size-matters/>

38 <https://www.oscn.net/applications/oscn/DeliverDocument.asp?citeid=468033>

39 <https://www.oklahoman.com/story/news/politics/2016/03/27/a-generation-after-education-reform-oklahoma-is-facing-familiar-issues/60683965007/>



in the early 2000s, over one-third of districts were granted exemptions.⁴⁰ In 2010, the Legislature enacted a statewide moratorium on enforcement of the class size mandate.⁴¹

Passage of the big teacher pay raise in 2018 boosted per pupil funding enough to trigger the end of the class size moratorium.⁴² However, there's a major caveat: school districts can still be exempted from class size limits if they are at 85% or above of their bonded indebtedness capacity within a five-year period.⁴³ One 2021 report found that 96 school districts, including many of the state's largest districts in and around the Oklahoma City and Tulsa metropolitan areas, met that bonding threshold and thus qualified for exemptions from the class size limits.⁴⁴ Media reports and anecdotal evidence suggest that many districts regularly exceed the HB 1017 class size limits.⁴⁵

As Oklahoma increases teacher pay and state aid funding in line with this report's recommendations, legislators should commit to doing away with all exemptions to class size limits by 2030. Until then, as an interim measure, limits should be more strictly imposed on lower grades where the impact on student outcomes is the greatest. If legislators in 1990 had the good sense to insist that there should never be 30 first-grade children squeezed into a classroom, the same should be true thirty-five years later.

⁴⁰ <https://okpolicy.org/beyond-teacher-pay-class-size-matters/>

⁴¹ <https://oklahomawatch.org/2019/02/01/state-leaders-face-dilemma-in-addressing-class-sizes/> Before 2010 districts could apply for an exemption from the class size mandate on a case-by-case basis.

⁴² <https://oklahomawatch.org/2019/02/01/state-leaders-face-dilemma-in-addressing-class-sizes/>

⁴³ <https://law.justia.com/codes/oklahoma/title-70/section-70-18-113-1/>

⁴⁴ <https://ocpathink.org/post/independent-journalism/many-districts-exempted-from-class-size-limits>

⁴⁵ <https://nondoc.com/2024/04/15/okcps-class-sizes-increasing-as-pandemic-funds-expire-board-approves-big-bond-agreement/>

RECOMMENDATION #7

Greater Accountability for Private School Choice Programs

Overwhelmingly, Oklahoma parents choose public schools for their children, and they have a broad range of public school options to choose from, including neighborhood schools, magnet schools, charter schools, virtual schools, and alternative schools.⁴⁶ And until recently, it was almost universally accepted that public tax dollars could be used only to support these public schools.

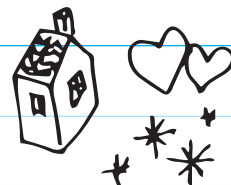
Over the last fifteen years, however, Oklahoma legislators have created three separate programs that provide taxpayer dollars to subsidize families that enroll their children in private schools:

- The Lindsey Nicole Henry (LNH) Scholarship, enacted in 2011, covers tuition for students with special needs and other categories of students to attend private school. It provided \$12.4 million in scholarships in 2023-24;
- The Equal Opportunity Education (EOE) Scholarship, enacted in 2012, provides up to \$25 million per year in tax credits for donations to organizations that offer scholarships to private school students;
- The Parental Choice Tax Credit (PCTC), enacted in 2023, offers up to \$7,500 towards the private school costs of any child in the state. It had a \$200 million funding cap in 2025 that will rise to \$250 million in 2026.⁴⁷

Many of our B.O.O.K. stakeholders raised strong concerns about this diversion of public dollars to private schools that operate free of the formal rules and responsibilities we insist that our public schools adhere to as a condition of receiving taxpayer dollars. While there is likely little value in advocating for the repeal or even the downsizing of

⁴⁶ Advance Oklahoma's Kids has published a thorough review of public and private school choice options available at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/64cd15fedd9ec824496f73e7/t/67cb4879cc33af-1f241a4542/1741375613345/School+choice+-+A+Full+Menu+2025+publication.pdf>

⁴⁷ <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/64cd15fedd9ec824496f73e7/t/67cb4879cc33af-1f241a4542/1741375613345/School+choice+-+A+Full+Menu+2025+publication.pdf>



these private school choice programs, Oklahomans do have the right to expect to know more about how and where their dollars are being spent and what results they are receiving for this investment of several hundreds of millions of dollars.



Among the commonsense proposals that lawmakers should enact to ensure greater transparency and accountability in the programs are:

- Disclosing the number of students and amount of tax credits received by each participating private school;
- Limiting the amount that private schools that receive tax credits can raise tuition to avoid cost-shifting;
- Requiring that students benefitting from the Parental Choice Tax Credit take the same standardized assessments as public school students so that student outcomes can be assessed and compared;
- Allowing families to benefit from only one of the private school choice programs, to avoid the stacking of credits that may exceed the full private school cost;
- Maintaining the current budgetary caps on the EOE scholarship and PCTC at least until more is known about who the programs are serving and the results they are producing.

Several bills to increase transparency and accountability for the Parental Choice Tax Credit program have been introduced in recent sessions, but none has advanced through the process.⁴⁸

48 See for example <http://www.oklegislature.gov/BillInfo.aspx?Bill=hb1255&Session=2500> and <http://www.oklegislature.gov/BillInfo.aspx?Bill=hb1395&Session=2500>

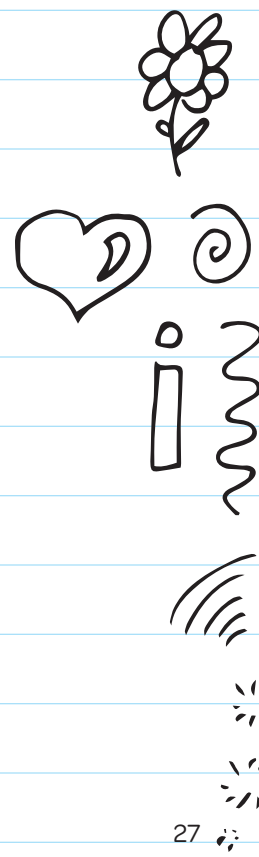
3

Improving Student Performance

Over many decades, in Oklahoma and across the United States, there have been extended and often heated policy debates over how to ensure that our schools are best prepared to succeed in post-secondary education, as members of the workforce, and as engaged citizens.

Some of the most vigorous education reform debates have addressed curriculum standards, graduation requirements, student testing and assessment, and school and teacher evaluations. At the federal level, some of these issues were addressed in 2001's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation,⁴⁹ and then in the Every Student Succeed Act (ESSA) of 2015.⁵⁰ At the state level, in addition to HB 1017 in 1990, legislators have enacted dozens of bills addressing the above subjects; in the 2000s and 2010s it seemed as if every legislative session brought multiple initiatives under the banner of 'education reform' that revised what students needed to graduate, or how schools would be evaluated, or what the curriculum would focus on.⁵¹

While these debates have become less intense and polarizing in recent years, there needs to be continued discussion on how best to make sure that the academic experience best meets the needs of every student. We propose three recommendations in this area: reduce the reliance on standardized tests; support personalized learner-centered education; and bolster creative elements of the school day.



49 <https://okpolicy.org/no-child-left-behind-nclb/>

50 <https://okpolicy.org/every-student-succeeds-act/>

51 <https://okpolicy.org/educational-reform-in-Oklahoma-since-1980/>

RECOMMENDATION #8

Reduce the Reliance on Standardized Tests

Throughout the B.O.O.K. process, we heard repeatedly from stakeholders who objected to the undue emphasis that schools place on standardized testing. Many expressed frustration at instruction that is oriented towards optimizing test results, and at how classes that are not subject to standardized testing, such as social studies, languages, and the arts, are downplayed in favor of classes that are. **One listening session participant stated that teaching isn't fun anymore because teachers constantly have to prepare students for state testing.**

There likely would be widespread support among teachers, administrators, parents and students alike to do away with high-stakes testing completely and instead use standardized tests simply as diagnostic tools. However, the hands of the Legislature and local districts are largely tied by the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) law that requires students to take state tests in reading and math every year in third through eighth grade and once in high school.⁵²

If the state has limited discretion regarding which tests it administers, it has more regarding how standardized tests are used. Under ESSA, states must consider student test scores and measures of test score growth as part of their statewide accountability system.⁵³ Oklahoma has opted to weigh these factors very heavily, with 75% of the overall grade for an elementary and middle school and 55% of the overall grade for a high school tied directly to student standardized test scores.⁵⁴ State

⁵² In Oklahoma, students in third through eighth grade take the Oklahoma State Testing Program (OSTP) in English language arts and math. Students in fifth and eighth grade also take a test in science, while high school students take a two-part College and Career Readiness Assessment (CCRA) in 11th grade that includes either the ACT or SAT, along with a test focused on science and U.S. History. <https://www.pta.org/docs/default-source/files/family-resources/2021/state-assessment-guides/ok-assessmentguide-familyguide.pdf>

⁵³ https://www.parentcenterhub.org/wp-content/uploads/repo_items/essa-factsheet-accountability-school-supports.pdf

⁵⁴ <https://oklahoma.gov/education/oklaschools/public-school-report-card.html>



statute recognizes other possible measures of school quality and student success, including school climate, school safety, student and educator engagement, graduation rates, postsecondary readiness, and extended school years, but these indicators cumulatively count for less than results on standardized scores.⁵⁵ **The Legislature should work with education policy experts on a new school report card formula that reduces the weight of standardized test results** in favor of measures that better reflect the full academic experience.

More urgently, the Legislature should immediately rescind an administrative rule adopted in 2024 by the State Board of Education that threatens school districts with accreditation deficiencies, and ultimately a state takeover, if a majority of their students test below basic proficiency on either the English language arts or math statewide test.⁵⁶ As Oklahoma Appleseed noted when the rule was adopted, tying accreditation to the results of a single standardized test result is “like No Child Left Behind on steroids.”⁵⁷ Essentially, the future of Oklahoma school districts now hinges on their students’ performance on single standardized tests, which places enormous pressure on teachers to teach to the reading and math tests, and on students to score well. Based on 2022-23 test results, over 60 school districts could be threatened with deficiencies and an eventual loss of accreditation; most of these districts primarily serve low-income and English learner students.⁵⁸ State statute already acknowledges much better ways to identify and support struggling schools than with the threat of accreditation penalties based on standardized test scores.⁵⁹

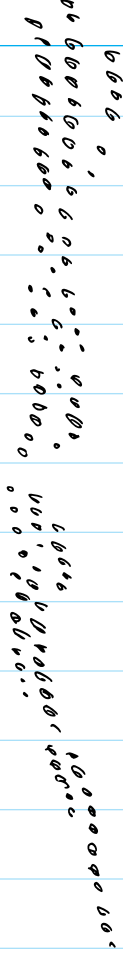
55 <https://www.oklegislature.gov/BillInfo.aspx?Bill=sb%20711&Session=2500> and <https://oklaschools.com/>

56 <https://www.okappleseed.org/articles/public-comment-oklahoma-should-not-threaten-high-poverty-schools-with-punitive-accreditation-regulations>

57 https://tulsaworld.com/opinion/column/article_77283cc2-e612-11ee-876f-53562cc03635.html

58 <https://www.okappleseed.org/articles/public-comment-oklahoma-should-not-threaten-high-poverty-schools-with-punitive-accreditation-regulations>

59 <https://law.justia.com/codes/oklahoma/2022/title-70/section-70-1210-541/>



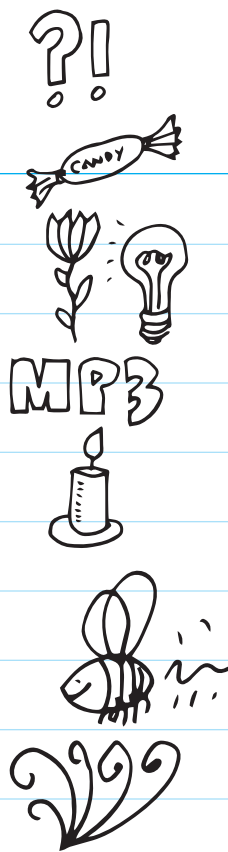
RECOMMENDATION #9

Support Personalized Learner-Centered Education

Throughout our stakeholder engagement process, many educators, policymakers, and parents emphasized the importance of schools offering students learning opportunities that engage, excite, and enrich them.

One longtime administrator stated that “schools have an obligation to offer experiences that are compelling to kids. Too often we have outdated structures of learning that just aren’t relevant to students.” A current state legislator echoed that idea, saying that we must move beyond trying to fit students into a cookie cutter mold that doesn’t allow them to advance at their own pace. Instead, schools should offer students more tailored learning based on individual interests and goals.

Several of our stakeholders shared examples of promising programs that could serve as models for school districts across the state. For instance, one of our AOK steering committee members, who previously served as Superintendent of Woodward Public Schools (WPS), spoke with great enthusiasm about a partnership several area schools districts have with their local vo-tech, the High Plains Technology Center, to participate in the Technical Applications Program.⁶⁰ In Woodward, every sixth-grader enrolls in the Technical Applications Program for a full year, where they are provided hands-on training in trades taught at the vo-tech geared towards local industries, such as health careers, welding, or wind tech. In addition, the program works to strengthen students’ soft skills, including leadership, time management, self-discipline, and community involvement. After serving all Woodward sixth graders, the program is offered to students as an elective class through 10th grade.



According to Woodward's former Superintendent, TAP helps middle-school students discover activities that are relevant and they can be passionate about. He reports that the program has produced far-ranging collateral benefits, with participating students showing higher ACT scores, better attendance, and far fewer disciplinary issues. Out of the program's first graduating class at WPS, four valedictorians went on to pursue career tech programs instead of college because TAP had helped them identify a direct pathway to a meaningful occupation.

The Technical Applications Program succeeds because it is rooted in the resources, interests, and needs of the local community out in western Oklahoma, which may or may not be the best fit for students and schools elsewhere in the state. Accordingly, B.O.O.K. doesn't suggest that any one program necessarily be replicated across the whole state and would caution against legislation imposing mandates on all districts. Instead, the goal should be to encourage all districts to become more flexible, innovative, and responsive to the needs of their students. The State Department of Education may have a role to play in identifying innovative and successful programs, offering technical support, and sharing resources.

RECOMMENDATION #10

Bolster Creative Elements of the School Day

For many of our stakeholders, the current focus of our schools on testing and the core academic curriculum has tended to come at the expense of the more creative parts of a student's time in school. That includes the fine arts—drama, music, art and dance—that fewer schools are now able to offer, and also the time that is left available for simple play.

One listening session participant complained that “the amount of instructional time on reading and math in elementary schools doesn’t leave enough time to eat lunch, time to play, time to be an actual human being.” Another urged allowing students to explore and play while they learn, and suggested gardening programs as one example.

While there are many ways to encourage creativity and play, one approach that Oklahoma legislators should consider is to require schools to provide a daily recess period. Close to 15 states have laws on the books requiring a certain amount of daily recess time for at least some grades, according to a 2023 survey by the organization Kids Needs Recess.⁶¹ As one recent article notes, researchers agree that “recess, and unstructured play, are essential for children’s development—both in building communication and leadership skills, for physical and mental health benefits.”⁶² Some psychologists have linked children’s growing mental health problems with declining time spent in outdoor play, including less recess time at school.⁶³

61 <https://kidsneedrecess.com/statelaws/>

62 <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/research-says-recess-is-important-what-stands-in-the-way/2025/03>

63 <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-baby-scientist/202310/has-a-decline-in-playtime-affected-childrens-mental-health>



In Oklahoma, HB 1493, a bipartisan bill authored by Rep. Jacob Rosecrants (D-Norman) and Sen. Brenda Stanley (R-Midwest City), passed the Oklahoma House in 2025.⁶⁴ The bill stated that daily recess is:

essential for students as it provides a necessary break from academic work, allowing students to recharge both mentally and physically. Physical activity during recess helps improve focus, reduce stress, and support overall physical health. It also encourages social interaction where children learn important skills like teamwork, conflict resolution, and communication. By giving students adequate time to play and unwind, recess fosters better behavior in the classroom and enhances students' ability to concentrate and learn effectively.

HB 1493 requires school districts to provide at least 30 minutes of daily recess to students from pre-kindergarten through fifth grade and strongly recommends 30 minutes of daily recess for students in grades 6-8. The bill requires recess to be spent outdoors, weather permitting, and allows school districts to break recess up into segments that best fit their schedules.

HB 1493 passed the full House 73-12 in 2025 but was not allowed a committee hearing in the Senate. However, HB 1493 remains alive and available for consideration in 2026; legislators should pass the bill and Governor Stitt should sign it into law.

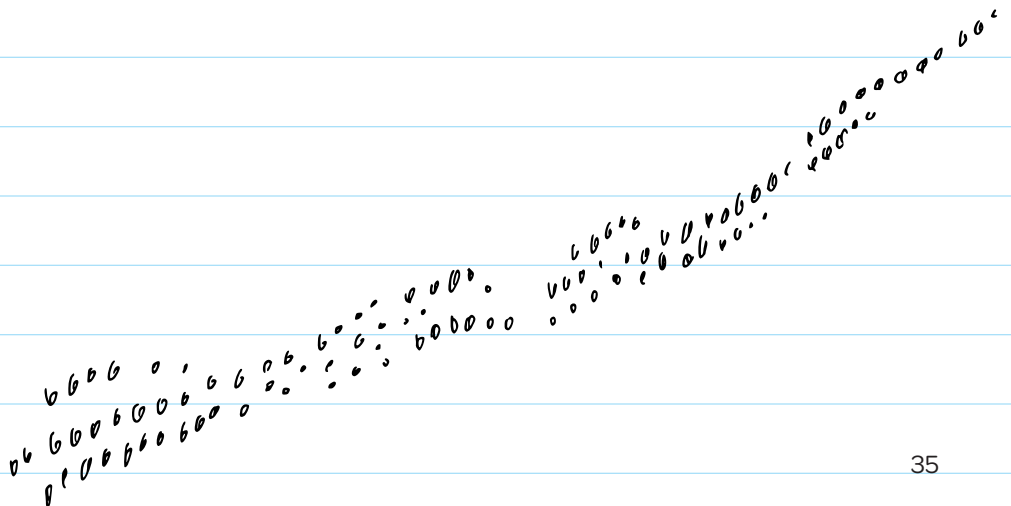
64 <https://www.oklegislature.gov/BillInfo.aspx?Bill=HB%201493&Session=2500>

4

Creating a Safe, Healthy and Supportive School Environment

For better or for worse, much of what we expect from our schools in the 21st century involves not only instructing students in the academic curriculum and preparing them for post-secondary education and the workforce, but also providing for their health, safety, and well-being. It is extremely difficult for students to succeed academically if they are coming to school hungry or in poor health; if they are dealing with chaotic home lives and violent neighborhoods; if they lack reliable means to get to school, or if their own behavior or that of their classmates is disruptive.

Many of our most thoughtful contributions to the B.O.O.K. consultation process involved what schools can do to ensure a safe, healthy, and supportive school environment for all students. We propose several key recommendations in this area involving school counselors, community schools, school discipline, school attendance, and school meals.



RECOMMENDATION #11

Increase Resources for Student Mental Health

The evidence that a growing number of children across the United States are struggling with mental health issues is overwhelming.

Most recently, a major longitudinal study published in JAMA (Journal of the American Medical Association) found that “the health of children in the United States has significantly deteriorated across nearly every major health indicator” in 2022 compared to 2005.” The new study found that, “diagnoses of anxiety, depression, and eating disorders more than tripled in some cases...More children reported trouble sleeping, physical symptoms like fatigue and pain, and feelings of loneliness and sadness.”⁶⁵

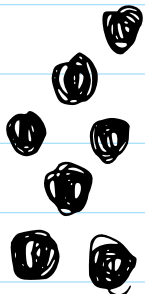
The problems American children face nationally are experienced even more acutely in Oklahoma. Our state consistently shows up among the states with the highest prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences, which include economic hardship, domestic and neighborhood violence, and other factors.⁶⁶ These external sources of stress and instability have a direct impact on kids’ ability to function successfully at school.

We heard consistently from our stakeholders that Oklahoma schools are falling well short of meeting the mental health needs of their students. The need to increase access to counselors and mental health professionals in every school, especially in elementary schools and in rural schools, was among the most frequently stated recommendations in both our survey and listening sessions. “Current counselors are not focused on mental health, they are more academic advisors,” one listening group participant noted. Counselors may also be called upon to handle classroom duties, administer state testing, hold one-on-one enrollment meetings, and book visits for college recruiters.⁶⁷

65 <https://www.uclahealth.org/news/release/new-research-reveals-alarming-decline-us-childrens-health>

66 <https://statehealthcompare.shadac.org/rank/243/percent-of-children-with-adverse-childhood-experiences-aces-by-total#1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16,17,18,19,20,21,22,23,24,25,26,27,28,29,30,31,32,33,34,35,36,37,38,39,40,41,42,43,44,45,46,47,48,49,50,51,52/173/31/279/false/highest>

67 <https://www.kosu.org/education/2023-07-11/oklahoma-faces-critical-shortage-of-school-counselors>



Under the prior leadership at the State Department of Education, \$35 million in COVID stabilization funding was allocated to create the School Counselor Corps. Schools could use grant funds to hire counselors, psychologists, therapists, or social workers aimed at improving student academic, attendance, and discipline outcomes.⁶⁸⁶⁹

The School Counselor Corps succeeded in funding more than 300 new positions, as well as offering enhanced training for mental health professionals, developing innovative new programs, and strengthening connections to community mental health providers.⁷⁰ The state was able to improve its counselor-to-student ratio from one counselor per 411 students to one counselor per 378 students—although this remained well above the nationally recommended level of 1 counselor for every 250 students.⁷¹

Unfortunately, Covid funding was not reauthorized past the 2023-24 school year. As the money dried up, some districts were able to reallocate funds to maintain positions created through the School Counselor Corps, even at the expense of shifting money away from classroom teachers and other critical needs.⁷² Many districts, however, have been forced to reduce or eliminate mental health services.⁷³

A bipartisan bill (HB 2827) to create a statewide grant program modeled on the School Counselor Corps was introduced in 2023 and made it most of the way through the legislative process before dying in the Senate.⁷⁴ Oklahoma lawmakers should approve similar legislation along with a clear commitment to provide additional long-term funding for school counselors and mental health professionals.

68 https://readytogether.sde.ok.gov/sites/default/files/2021-05/School%20Counselor%20Corps%20Initiative_0.pdf

69 <https://okcfox.com/news/local/oklahoma-state-department-of-education-school-counselor-corps-os-de-state-superintendent-of-public-instruction-joy-hofmeister-elementary-and-secondary-school-emergency-relief-fund-esser-public-education-schools>

70 <https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/OKSDE/bulletins/32e0975>

71 <https://oklahomawatch.org/2024/07/26/sunset-of-counselor-corps-leads-to-budget-cuts-staff-reductions/>

72 <https://oklahomawatch.org/2024/07/26/sunset-of-counselor-corps-leads-to-budget-cuts-staff-reductions/>

73 <https://oklahomawatch.org/2024/07/26/sunset-of-counselor-corps-leads-to-budget-cuts-staff-reductions/>

74 <https://www.oklegislature.gov/BillInfo.aspx?Bill=HB2827&Session=2300>

RECOMMENDATION #12

Promote Community Schools

Many school leaders understand that ensuring student success depends on a more comprehensive approach to education that addresses not just academic needs but also the child's health, social, and emotional well-being—especially for children facing poverty, homelessness, hunger, violence, and other adverse experiences. It also requires engaging families in school decision-making and in finding ways to connect families to services they need in the community.

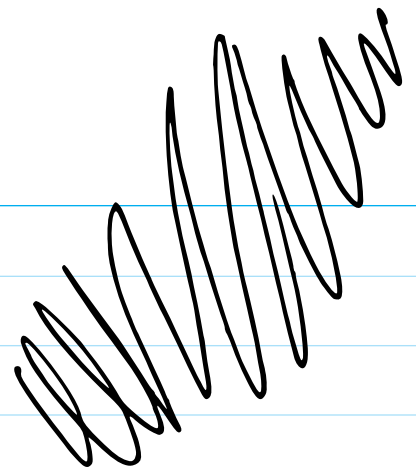
Community schools are efforts to adopt this kind of a holistic approach to meeting the needs of students and their families. The community schools model “is one in which public schools partner with families and community organizations to provide well-rounded educational opportunities and supports for students’ school success,” according to the Learning Policy Institute.⁷⁵ The research-based model rests on four pillars that are incorporated into most community schools:

- *Integrated student supports*, including physical and mental health services;
- *Expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities*, including after-school, weekend, and summer programs that offer academic instruction and individualized support
- *Active family and community engagement*, that include educational opportunities for adults; and
- *Collaborative leadership and practices*, involving a dedicated staff member to coordinate support programs.⁷⁶

Community schools have been shown to yield myriad benefits, including reducing health-related obstacles, decreasing student mobility rates, helping parents support

⁷⁵ <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/blog/four-ways-schools-can-support-whole-child>

⁷⁶ https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Community_Schools_Effective_IN-FOGRAPHIC.pdf



the work of classroom teachers, and promoting community involvement.⁷⁷

There are some examples of thriving and successful community schools in Oklahoma.

For example, Union Public Schools in Tulsa County began laying the foundation for the creation of community schools in the mid-2000s as they saw a rapid increase in students “who needed more support than a traditional school district could provide.”⁷⁸

The district currently operates eight full-service community elementary schools grounded in the four pillars laid out above. These schools “offer a robust menu of resources and programs” for their students and families, “including Baby Book Club, After-School Programs, Family Events, Holiday Assistance, School-Based Counseling, etc.”⁷⁹

The Oklahoma Legislature has considered bills, such as HB 3374 (Rep. T. West) in 2022 that would provide grants, subject to the availability of funds, to school districts “to establish pilot projects that create community schools within a school district or at a school site.”⁸⁰ HB 3374 - would have required the designation of a community school coordinator, development of a comprehensive needs assessment, site-based collaborative leadership, and ongoing stakeholder engagement. Other core pillars of full-service community schools, including strengthened curriculum and learning programs, expanded learning opportunities and integrated student supports, were left optional for schools selected for the community school pilot projects. HB 3374 passed the full House and a Senate committee before failing to advance further.

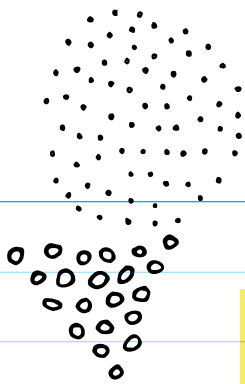
The Legislature should make a strong commitment to community schools by adopting legislation along the lines of HB 3374 that codifies the core pillars of the model and provides a dedicated funding stream that will allow for the hiring of community school coordinators.

77 <https://www.aft.org/position/community-schools/outcomes>

78 <https://www.unionps.org/about/community-schools>

79 <https://www.unionps.org/about/community-schools>

80 https://www.oklegislature.gov/cf_pdf/2021-22%20ENGR/hB/HB3374%20ENGR.PDF



RECOMMENDATION #13

Support the Use of School-Based Restorative Justice

Student behavioral issues are consistently cited as among the greatest challenges facing classroom teachers and school personnel. One listening session participant discussed a survey at their school that found that one in five teachers reported being physically assaulted by a student that year, with two teachers suffering permanent injuries. Even when student behavior doesn't reach that level of aggression, managing disruptive students places a heavy strain on teacher morale and affects the opportunities for all students to learn in a safe and healthy environment.

Over the course of several decades, schools across the United States, including in Oklahoma, relied increasingly on exclusionary discipline—particularly in-school and out-of-school suspensions and expulsions—as a primary response to student behavior issues. As the Learning Policy Institute notes:

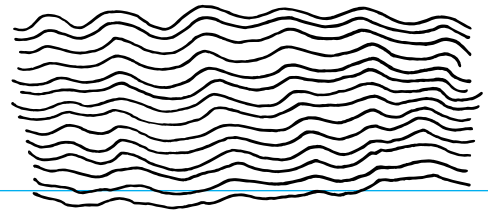
This type of discipline dramatically increased in the United States over several decades as a result of zero-tolerance policies that were often applied to relatively minor, nonviolent misbehavior such as tardiness or “disrespect.” Such exclusionary punishments have deleterious consequences and disproportionately impact students of color and students with disabilities.⁸¹

Concern over the excessive use of exclusionary discipline has grown over the past two decades, in part due to an awareness of how these school-based practices fueled “the school-to-prison pipeline” pushing African American youth in particular into the juvenile and criminal justice systems.⁸² In the 2010s, the Office of Civil Rights of the U.S. Department of Education investigated the disciplinary practices of many school districts, including Oklahoma City Public Schools, and negotiated formal settlements that prohibited exclusionary discipline to the maximum extent possible, among other mandated reforms.⁸³

81 <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/crdc-school-suspension-report#:~:text=Exclusionary%20discipline%2C%20which%20involves%20removing,to%20communicating%20or%20resolving%20conflicts.>

82 <https://www.aclu.org/documents/what-school-prison-pipeline>

83 <https://kfor.com/news/oklahoma-city-public-schools-agrees-to-address-disproportionate-discipline-of-black-students/>



Several of our stakeholders urged greater commitment to and investment in non-punitive approaches, especially restorative justice. Restorative justice programs in public schools, according to one definition, “offer a collaborative approach to addressing conflicts and misconduct, focusing on repairing harm and rebuilding relationships rather than punitive measures.”⁸⁴ Foundational practices of a restorative justice approach include facilitated dialogues, conflict resolution, mediation sessions, community service, restorative conferences, support and reintegration.⁸⁵ Where schools have implemented research-based restorative justice practices, the results have included improved school climate, lower rates of discipline, reduced racial disparities in school discipline, and better student health and well-being.⁸⁶

Twenty-one states, including Texas, New Mexico, Colorado and Louisiana, have adopted laws that support the use of school-based restorative justice, according to a 2020 study by the Georgetown University Center on Gender Justice & Opportunity.⁸⁷ State laws vary, but many require (or at least permit) schools to consider restorative justice as an alternative to exclusionary school discipline, with many states including restorative justice as a mandatory or optional component of teachers’ professional development. Two states—Maryland and Maine —have gone furthest by promoting whole-school restorative justice models.

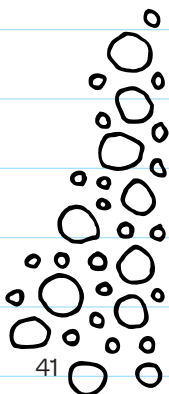
Oklahoma should join these states by enacting legislation that would recognize and support the adoption of restorative justice practices as a preferred alternative to exclusionary practices to the greatest extent possible.

⁸⁴ <https://www.weareteachers.com/restorative-justice/>

⁸⁵ <https://www.weareteachers.com/restorative-justice/>

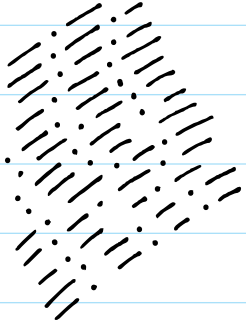
⁸⁶ <https://genderjusticeandopportunity.georgetown.edu/report/school-based-restorative-justice-state-by-state-analysis/>

⁸⁷ <https://genderjusticeandopportunity.georgetown.edu/report/school-based-restorative-justice-state-by-state-analysis/>



RECOMMENDATION #14

End the Use of School Corporal Punishment



Over the years, Oklahoma has prohibited the use of corporal punishment—defined in state statute as the deliberate infliction of physical pain by hitting, spanking, slapping, or any other physical force used as a means of discipline⁸⁸—by government actors in juvenile detention facilities, jails, prisons, veterans care homes, and military bases. The only Oklahomans who may still be legally subjected to physical pain by state actors are public schoolchildren.

There is a broad consensus against corporal punishment among health, educational, and civil rights organizations, grounded in substantial research showing that corporal punishment has a wide array of adverse physical and psychological effects, ranging from serious physical injuries to mental health problems to poor school performance, higher dropout rates, and greater likelihood of engaging in violence and abuse.⁸⁹

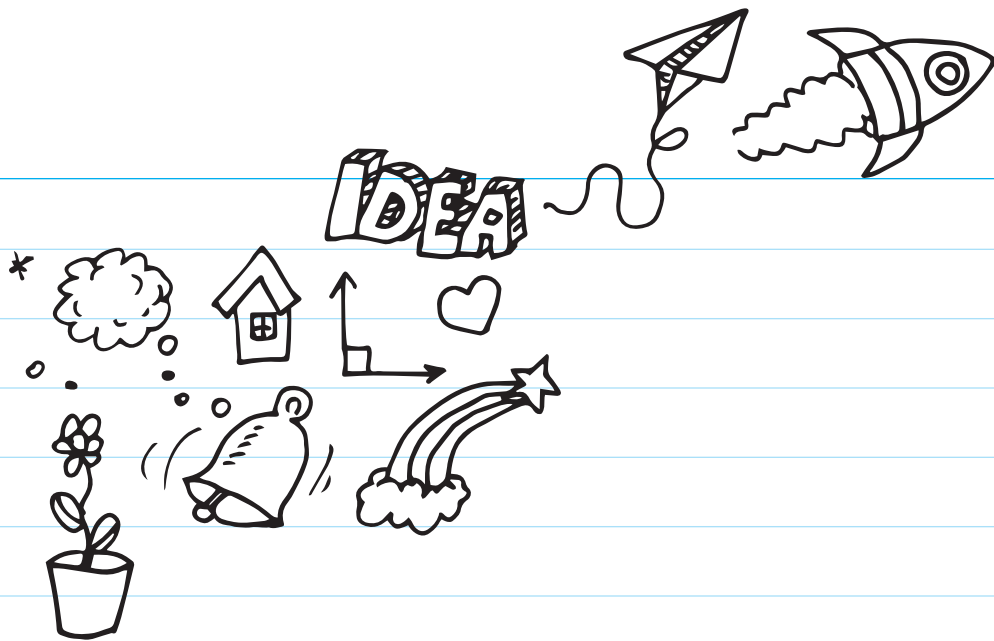
Thirty-six years ago, Task Force 2000, the report that formed the foundation for HB 1017, called for the abolition of corporal punishment in the public school system, asserting that “this form of negative reinforcement is neither appropriate nor effective.”⁹⁰ Ultimately, however, this Task Force recommendation did not make it into the bill that passed the Legislature in 1990. While abolishing corporal punishment would have been somewhat groundbreaking in 1990, Oklahoma is now one of just 17 states to still allow corporal punishment in public schools.⁹¹ The number of students

88 <https://law.justia.com/codes/oklahoma/title-70/section-70-13-116/>

89 <https://www.okappleseed.org/we-dont-hit-report>

90 <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ddgtUsA62mInMrcAYKyCEuLc0aGoNe1/view?usp=sharing>

91 <https://www.okappleseed.org/we-dont-hit-report>



subjected to corporal punishment in the U.S. has declined by 95% since 1976: from over 1.5 million students to fewer than 70,000 in 2018 and then to just 19,395 in 2021.⁹²

The number of children subject to corporal punishment has also fallen sharply in Oklahoma, where it is now practiced in just over one in four school districts, almost all of which are small and rural. However, Oklahoma ranked fifth among the states in the prevalence of students subjected to corporal punishment in 2020-21, and the 166 preschool children in Oklahoma subject to corporal punishment accounted for one out three subject to the practice in the entire United States.⁹³ Data collected by the U.S. Department of Education also revealed that students with disabilities and Native American children are likelier to be subjected to corporal punishment than other Oklahoma students.⁹⁴

The Oklahoma Legislature took an important but partial step towards abolishing school corporal punishment in 2025 with passage of SB 364 that prohibits corporal punishment for any child identified with a disability in accordance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).⁹⁵ **It's now time for Oklahoma to finish the job and declare that hitting any public school child is never okay.**

⁹² <https://www.okappleseed.org/articles/corporal-punishment-in-ok-declines-but-big-inequities-remain>

⁹³ <https://www.okappleseed.org/articles/corporal-punishment-in-ok-declines-but-big-inequities-remain>

⁹⁴ <https://www.okappleseed.org/we-dont-hit-report>

⁹⁵ <https://www.oklegislature.gov/BillInfo.aspx?Bill=SB364&Session=2500>

RECOMMENDATION #15

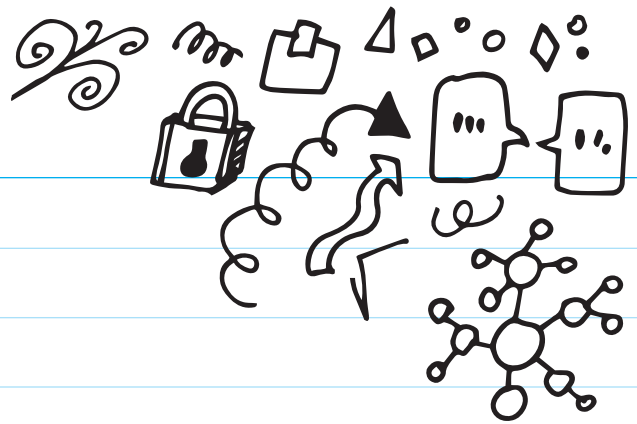
Implement multi-tiered intervention systems to address chronic absenteeism

Absenteeism has been a longstanding problem confronting American schools, and the issue has gained increasing attention and concern since the COVID-19 pandemic. Across the United States, the rate of chronic absenteeism—defined as missing ten percent or more of school days—increased from 15 percent in 2019 to 28 percent in 2022. Rates have declined since 2022 but remain above pre-Covid levels in most jurisdictions.⁹⁶

It is widely recognized that students who miss a significant amount of school perform worse academically, are more likely to drop out of school, and experience worse outcomes later in life. Absenteeism is substantially higher among low-income students, African American students, and students with disabilities, which means that any efforts to tackle educational inequities must tackle the issue of school attendance.

School officials in Oklahoma and across the country are devoting renewed attention to identifying the best policies and practices to ensure that students attend school regularly. While truancy laws remain on the books that can subject parents and older students to criminal sanctions for failure to attend school, the clear consensus among policy experts and practitioners is for an approach along the lines of the one developed and promoted by the organization Attendance Works called multi-tiered intervention. This approach involves three progressive tiers:

- **Tier 1:** *Universal supports* aimed at encouraging better attendance for all students and at preventing absenteeism before it affects achievement.
- **Tier 2:** *Targeted Interventions* are designed to remove barriers to attendance for students at greater risk of chronic absenteeism, such as those who missed



10% of the school year. . These students and families should receive personalized attention as part of the engagement strategy.

- **Tier 3:** *Intensive Interventions* to students missing 20% or more of the school year, often involving not just schools but other agencies such as health, housing and social services, and typically requiring case management customized to individual students' challenges.⁹⁷

Our recommendations related to multi-tiered interventions are aimed at both the Legislature and school districts. As laid out on Oklahoma Appleseed's 2024

report, *Make Court a Last Resort: Truancy and Chronic Absenteeism in Oklahoma*, Oklahoma should join other states that statutorily require schools to pursue multi-tiered interventions aimed at addressing attendance issues, with court referrals permitted only as a final resort if and when other strategies have been attempted and have failed.⁹⁸ Legislation along those lines was introduced in 2024 (HB 1009, Rep. Pogemiller) but was not heard in committee.⁹⁹

Whether or not this becomes a statutory requirement, all school districts should adopt multi-tiered approaches that begin with strategies to ensure good attendance for all students and proceed to more intensive and individualized interventions for those students who accumulate unexcused absences. Every effort should be made to identify barriers to attendance and to ensure that families are connected to internal and external resources that may help promote consistent attendance.

⁹⁷ <https://www.attendanceworks.org/chronic-absence/addressing-chronic-absence/3-tiers-of-intervention/>

and <https://www.everydaylabs.com/post/mtss-corner-using-mtss-to-support-chronically-absent-students>)

⁹⁸ https://drive.google.com/file/d/1w8NOhrXPoc9RoqkEL_xeTE-QPXUyA92S/view, p. 57

⁹⁹ <http://www.oklegislature.gov/BillInfo.aspx?Bill=hb1109&Session=2500>



RECOMMENDATION #16

Provide Healthy Meals At No Cost for All Students

In discussions of student health and well-being, our stakeholders consistently emphasized that when children are hungry, they can't learn. This led many to recommend no-cost school meals be made available to all students. The National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program provide eligible students free or low-cost meals that must meet federal nutrition standards aligned with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Children in households with income below 130% of the federal poverty level qualify for free meals, while those in households with incomes between 130% and 185% of the poverty line qualify for reduced-cost meals, which can cost no more than 30 cents for breakfast and 40 cents for lunch.¹⁰⁰ Eligibility can also be based on participation in other public benefit programs. Although schools have traditionally determined eligibility for free and reduced meal programs on an individual household basis, several recent initiatives have aimed both to simplify and expand eligibility.

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is a federal initiative that allows schools and districts that serve a certain threshold of low-income students to serve breakfast and lunch at no cost to all enrolled students without the need to determine eligibility for individual households.¹⁰¹

The benefits of CEP include reduced childhood hunger, elimination of school meal debt, reduced stigma associated with free meals, easing of administrative work for schools, and improved academic achievement, according to a 2022 report from FRAC.¹⁰² Eliminating school meal debt is an especially important benefit of CEP; in Oklahoma, school meal debt totalled \$120 million, according to a 2024 report by the Education Data Initiative.¹⁰³

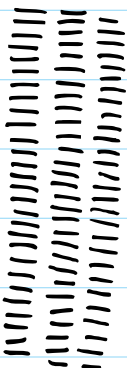
In 2024-25, 844 Oklahoma schools in 267 school districts, serving a total of 277,449

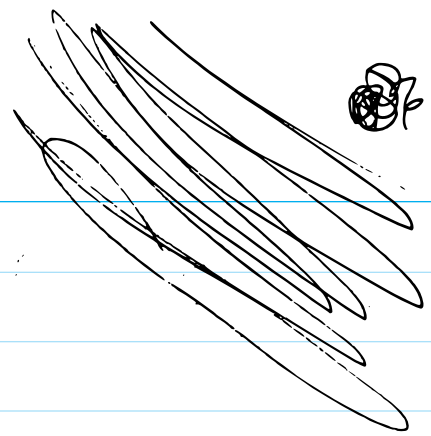
100 <https://frac.org/school-meal-eligibility-reimbursements>

101 <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/cep>

102 <https://frac.org/cep-report-2023>

103 <https://educationdata.org/school-lunch-debt>





students, participated in CEP.¹⁰⁴ However, an additional 786 schools are eligible to implement CEP as of 2025 but are not taking advantage of it, according to Hunger Free Oklahoma.¹⁰⁵

While all eligible schools should adopt the Community Eligibility Provision, the Oklahoma Legislature should go further and extend free school meals to all students. Universal school meals were in effect nationally from 2020 to 2022 during Covid, but the program was allowed to lapse. Currently, at least eight states—California, Maine, Colorado, Minnesota, New Mexico, Vermont, Michigan, and Massachusetts—have passed Healthy School Meals for All legislation.¹⁰⁶

Recently, State Superintendent Ryan Walters embraced the idea of universal school meals and sent out a memo ordering school districts to provide free breakfast and lunch to all students beginning with the 2025-26 school year.¹⁰⁷ While Walters asserted that districts already have enough state and federal funds to afford the expense, school officials warned that funding free meals out of existing budgets would dramatically impact funding for other programs and services.¹⁰⁸

Rather than subject schools to an unfunded mandate, the Oklahoma Legislature should pass Healthy School Meals for All legislation and appropriate the necessary state funds to ensure that all schools are able to provide meals to all their students, eliminating paperwork barriers for families and ending the shame and financial strain of school meal debt.

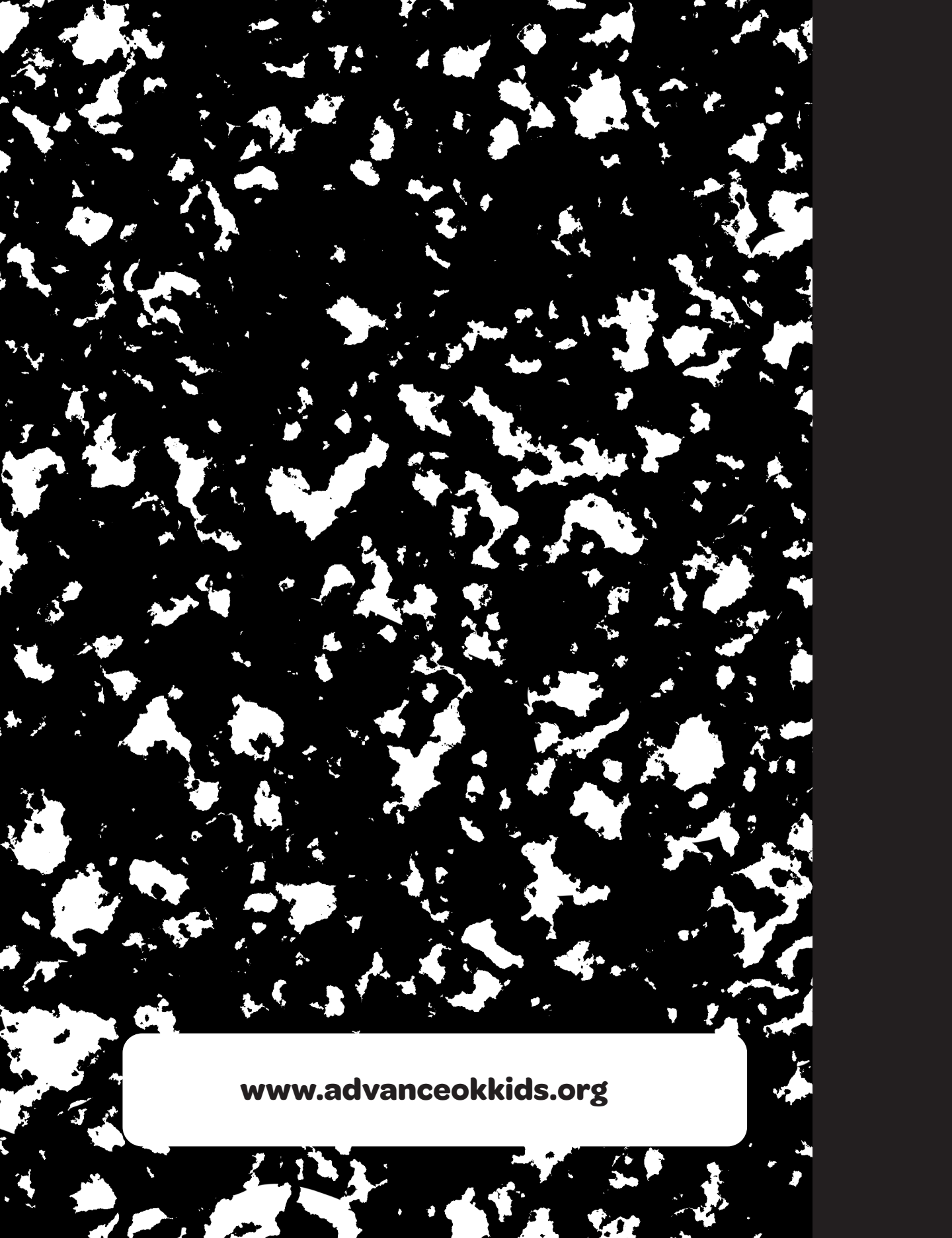
104 <https://www.google.com/url?q=https://oklahoma.gov/content/dam/ok/en/osde/documents/services/child-nutrition/child-nutrition-documents/community-eligibility-provision/Community%2520Eligibility%2520Proxy%2520for%2520Districts%2520and%2520Sites%25202025%2520v2.xlsx&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1752702852290028&usg=AOvVaw1YHMoB33wozoy5d-g46ghe>

105 <https://www.yahoo.com/news/oklahoma-doubled-free-school-meal-104501683.html>

106 <https://frac.org/blog/free-healthy-school-meals-for-all-policies>

107 <https://oklahomavoice.com/2025/07/07/oklahoma-superintendent-orders-all-districts-to-of-fer-free-meals-threatens-sanctions/>

108 <https://kfor.com/news/local/walters-slammed-for-unfunded-school-lunch-mandate-critics-say-he-has-no-authority-to-enforce/>



www.advanceokkids.org