

Action Items for Oklahoma



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Education

Target Resources and Reforms
to Meet Students' Real Needs

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This is the fourth of a seven part series by Oklahoma Policy Institute to propose public policy action items for the state of Oklahoma. These recommendations are aimed at improving the shared prosperity of all Oklahomans while maintaining a fiscally responsible state budget. Previous installments made recommendations for tax reform, criminal justice, and health care policies. Future installments will focus on energy, financial security, and jobs. Read the full series at www.okpolicy.org/action-items-for-oklahoma.

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Education

Target Resources and Reforms to Meet Students' Real Needs

Educating our children is Oklahoma's biggest job. It's the biggest in terms of dollars and cents, since common and higher education each year receive about half of all state appropriations.¹ It's also the biggest responsibility that we entrust to our state and local governments. Who we will be as a state and as a people in future decades is being decided right now in our schools.

Even so, Oklahoma provides fewer resources to common education compared to other states. Independent measures rank the state from 46th to 49th in per-pupil expenditures by public schools.^{2,3} Since the beginning of the recession, Oklahoma actually made the largest cuts in the nation to state aid funding per pupil, with state support dropping 22.8 percent, or \$810 per student after inflation.⁴

The task of our schools is made even more difficult by the large num-

ber of Oklahoma children struggling with poverty, which correlates with many struggles in the home that create an achievement gap for low-income students. No measure of school quality can be accurate if it does not take into account the very different situations faced by different students.

In evaluations of students outcomes, Oklahoma's performance tops our state's funding ranking, but it still lags behind the national average. Oklahoma ranks 27th in dropout rate, 35th for ACT scores, and 38th for NAEP scores out of all 50 states plus the District of Columbia.


In recent years, education reformers have focused on creating tougher mandates for student performance. Third grade reading requirements, high school graduation tests, value-added teacher evaluations, A-F grading for schools, and Common Core Standards together are ramping up the pressure on schools and children. These standards may demand

that student test scores improve, but they do not by themselves offer a strategy for making that happen.

There is not a simple solution. Oklahoma's students show up at school bringing diverse skills and backgrounds. Some have supportive parents who read to them every night; others are still learning English. Some are provided with the best tutors; others don't have enough to eat at home. Oklahoma has a duty to teach all of these children.

OK Policy recommends the following action items for Oklahoma to better fulfill that duty.

Action Items

- » Restore funding needed to meet Oklahoma's goals for children.
- » Implement policies to close the achievement gap.
- » Encourage saving for college with matching contributions for 529 college savings plans. 



Restore funding needed to meet Oklahoma's goals for children.

Oklahoma has passed major new mandates for school performance in recent years. Major reforms that have already begun implementation or are coming soon include end-of-instruction testing, third grade reading requirements, A-F grading for schools, and Common Core Standards. Yet at the same time as we are putting higher expectations on our schools and students, we are cutting our investments to help them meet those expectations.

By several measures, Oklahoma spends less on education than most other states. According to the National Education Association, Oklahoma is 49th out of all states and the District of Columbia in per pupil expenditures, ahead of only Arizona and Utah.² The U.S. Census Bureau similarly ranked Oklahoma 48th, ahead of Arizona, Idaho, and Utah.³

With spending already comparatively low before 2008, funding trends over the last five years have only made matters worse. On a per-student basis, Oklahoma schools have received the largest state aid cuts in the nation; Oklahoma's contribution through the state aid formula is down 22.8 percent since FY 2008, a drop of \$810 per student after inflation.⁴ Total funding to the State Department of Education is down by \$340 million after inflation.⁵

We are seeing repercussions in the classroom. Between 2010 and 2011, about one thousand teacher positions were eliminated. Class sizes are growing larger and many advanced electives like languages and music programs are being scaled back or eliminated

altogether. The number of Oklahoma school districts offering Advanced Placement classes has fallen every year for the past five years. The Department of Education has eliminated or significantly cut a slew of high-quality programs, including alternative education, Great Expectations, A+ Schools, and Literacy First.⁶

Meanwhile, Oklahoma's ban on intangible property taxes passed in State Question 766 is estimated to reduce funding for schools by \$30.8 million in 2013.⁷ That total is likely to grow as more companies take advantage of the new tax loophole. Scheduled cuts to federal education spending will reduce support for Oklahoma schools by another \$50 million.¹⁰

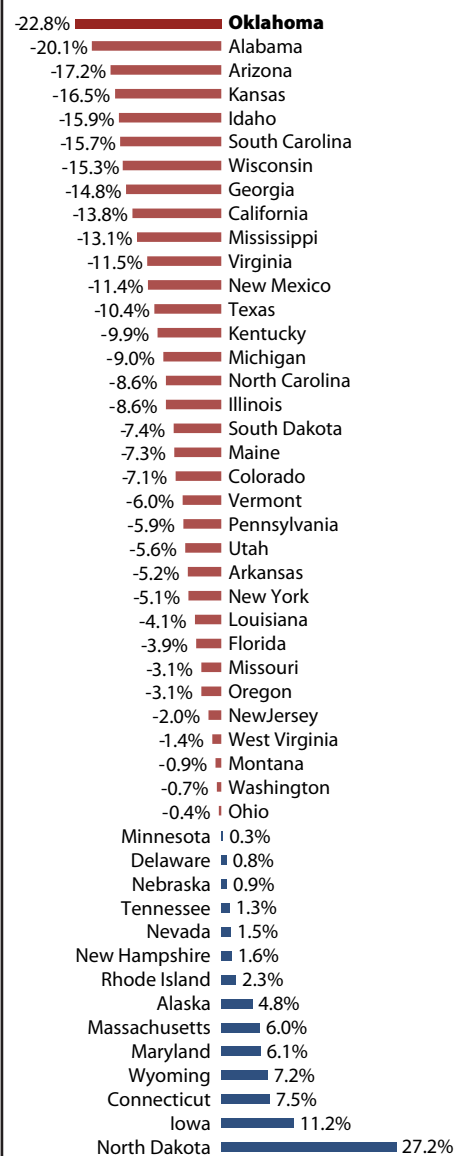
At the same time as we've reduced our investment in public schools, Oklahoma has approved multiple new mandates for student achievement. These are just the latest in a series of reforms going back decades — indeed, there have been so many reforms that it is impossible to tell with certainty which ones have worked and which have not.⁸

To meet our goals for children, Oklahoma needs make a new commitment to funding for schools. Education should be a priority over additional tax cuts, because a high-quality education system has been shown to be far more important for boosting state prosperity than low tax rates.⁹

Education should also be a top candidate for the investment of revenue gains from an improving economy and savings found by eliminating unnecessary tax credits and improving government efficiency. While it is premature to name an exact dollar amount without knowing the state of the economy or Oklahoma's future finances, lawmakers should set a minimum goal of restoring the level of per-pupil funding from before the recession. They should also ensure that any future reforms or mandates on schools are paid for with a clearly identified revenue source. 🏠

Oklahoma has made the deepest education cuts in the nation since the recession

Percent change in education formula funding per student, inflation-adjusted, FY08 to FY14



Sources: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities budget analysis and National Center for Education Statistics enrollment estimates



Implement policies to close the achievement gap.

If Oklahoma wants to improve student test scores to meet or exceed the national average, closing the achievement gap for underprivileged students has to be the number one priority. Oklahoma students who are not eligible for free or reduced school lunches because of higher family incomes already score above the national average on NAEP tests of math and reading. Students who are eligible for lunch subsidies score far below the national average, and the gap between eligible and non-eligible students is much larger than the gap between Oklahoma's state average and the national average.¹¹

The following policies can help to reduce the achievement gap by meeting the specific needs of those students who are falling behind.

Expand the community schools model for high-poverty districts.

In the Tulsa area, educators are improving outcomes for the most at-risk students through a community schools initiative. Schools in this program encourage much greater involvement of parents and the overall community than do typical public schools. School resources are put to use for neighborhood development and planning efforts, adult education, community gardening, and mentorships by volunteers from local businesses and non-profits. A study by researchers at the University of Oklahoma found that when fully implemented, these schools boosted the average math scores for low-income students enough to close the achievement gap.¹²

Encourage districts to adopt a year-round school year. Another strategy that has already been implemented successfully in some Oklahoma districts is year-round schooling. Most schools in Oklahoma and the United States still operate with a long summer break that

is a relic of a time before air-conditioning. Yet research shows that teachers can spend as long as four weeks reteaching lessons at the beginning of each school year because over the summer students forget what they had learned.¹³ This problem is especially prevalent among low-income students who do not have an enriching home environment.

Under a year round schedule, breaks are spaced out over the year instead of having one long break during the summer months. The year-round schools also remain open during breaks for students who may need additional help catching up. Oklahoma City has already implemented this schedule district-wide. Tulsa has implemented a year-round schedule in six schools, with potential to expand it further.

“ Kids in preschool programs end up more likely to graduate high school, less likely to get in trouble with the law, and more likely to own homes and have longer marriages.

Oklahoma should consider adopting a year-round schedule statewide. Year-round schools would also provide a safe, enriching environment for children of working parents who struggle to afford child care. Center-based child care in Oklahoma remains relatively affordable compared to other states, but it is still a large and growing burden for cash-strapped families. In 2011, the cost of center-based child care for 2 children exceeded median rent payments in all 50 states.¹⁴ High-quality summer school and after-school programs would provide an alternative that helps the family budget while giving kids more opportunities to learn.

Focus on best practices to teach the growing number of English Language Learners in the classroom. Oklahoma's Hispanic populations has nearly dou-


bled over the last decade. In 2011 Hispanics comprised 14 percent of K-12 students in Oklahoma, and the percentage in large urban districts was far higher. A large majority of Oklahoma's young Hispanics are U.S. citizens. They are a lasting part of the state's community and future workforce.

Many of these young Hispanics do not speak English in the home. Most English Language Learner (ELL) students are as capable of learning a challenging curriculum as any other students and should not be segregated in remedial classes.⁷ In fact, fluency in multiple languages is shown to offer cognitive advantages such as better focus on details and how language is structured.¹⁶ Nevertheless, they need an intensive focus on language learning in

PK-3 to reach the fluency of native English speakers. This instruction should be conducted in both English and students' native language, whenever possible. English-only education for young ELL students has been shown to actually reduce English proficiency in later grades compared to students who received bilingual instruction.¹⁶

Maintain Oklahoma's strong commitment to early childhood education.

Oklahoma continues to receive national praise for our early childhood education program, which outpaces most of the country in both its level of enrollment and the qualifications of its teachers. Our investment in early childhood is the greatest bright spot in Oklahoma's education system.

A large body of research shows that quality pre-K generates both short-term and long-term economic returns by attracting skilled workers with children, improving academic outcomes and closing achievement gaps in early grades for low-income children, and improving social and emotional skills.¹⁷ The latter outcome is especially powerful, as shown by research demonstrating kids in preschool programs end up more likely to graduate high school, less likely to get in trouble with the law, and more likely to own homes and have longer marriages.¹⁸ 



Encourage saving for college

with matching contributions for 529 college savings plans.

According to projections by the Oklahoma Department of Commerce, more than three-quarters of new jobs in Oklahoma between 2010 and 2020 will require at least some postsecondary education. Yet almost half of our population (46 percent) possesses only a high school diploma or less.¹⁹

Nationwide, a high percentage of college graduates in a state correlates very strongly with high wages.²⁰ Oklahoma matches this trend on the down side, with low educational attainment and a median hourly wage that lags well behind the national average. Oklahoma's median wage in 2010 was \$14.73 per


hour, which was \$1.27 below the national medium wage and lower than all but 10 other states. At 22.7 percent, we rank 42nd in percentage of the population with a bachelor's degree or more.

Increasing the number of college graduates to meet the needs of the modern and future economy will require a large effort on many fronts, and no single policy or program will do the job alone. However, one policy that could lead to significant improvements over the long-term would be for the state to provide matching contributions for 529 college savings plans for moderate to low-income families.

Oklahoma's 529 plans are a useful tool for families to save for a college with a tax-free investment vehicle. However, there's evidence that the families who struggle most to afford college educations for their children are being left out. The 2006 Oklahoma College Savings Task Force found that families earning less \$40,000 represented only 9.5 percent of 529 plan account-holders in Oklahoma at the time, despite

making up more than 50 percent of the state's population.²¹

The task force recommended that the state make initial deposits at birth and matching contributions during childhood to encourage low- and moderate-income families to set aside money for college. Similar initial deposits and matching contributions are already provided in 11 states (Arkansas, Colorado, Kansas, Louisiana, Maine, Missouri, Nevada, North Dakota, Rhode Island, Utah, and West Virginia).²² An increasing body of research shows that matched savings programs help low-income families to save money.²³

This type of program has several advantages over scholarships or other financial assistance provided later in life. The existence of a savings account would make the idea of pursuing a college education more real and influence students to work harder in primary education. It would also put more pressure on colleges to restrain tuition and costs, because families would be purchasing education with their own savings. 

States with more college graduates have the highest wages



Source: Economic Policy Institute analysis of CPS and CPS-ORG microdata

NOTES

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See these Oklahoma Policy Institute publications to learn more:

- » Severe education funding cuts threaten Oklahoma's economic future; February 2013; <http://okpolicy.org/severe-education-funding-cuts-threaten-oklahomas-economic-future>
- » Oklahoma's New Third Grade Retention Law; February 2013; <http://okpolicy.org/oklahomas-new-third-grade-retention-law>
- » Educational Reform in Oklahoma since 1980; March 2013; <http://okpolicy.org/educational-reform-in-oklahoma-since-1980>
- » Oklahoma's public schools have relatively low administration costs; April 2013; <http://okpolicy.org/oklahomas-public-schools-have-relatively-low-administration-costs>
- » Report confirms that for states, investing in education is key to prosperity; August 2013; <http://okpolicy.org/report-confirms-that-for-states-investing-in-education-is-key-to-prosperity>



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