

“We need to be the ones making the decision about when and how to reopen”

Oklahoma Schools reopen amid growing opposition from teachers

By Mitch Marcus and Phyllis Steele
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Many Oklahoma school districts are set to begin their fall semesters this week with in-person instruction. Statewide, there have been at least 43,962 cases and 605 deaths since the beginning of the pandemic, according to a *New York Times* database.

Teachers across the state have reacted with disgust and anger at the re-opening of schools, which threatens to produce an explosion of new infections and deaths. Many are opting for retirement, rather than risking the illness and possible death caused by the inevitable spread of the virus with schools opening.

Districts throughout the state, concerned with the growing danger of a rank-and-file rebellion, are threatening teachers for speaking out. One such warning states: “Not telling anyone what they can and can’t say but want to remind you, if you’re on social media, anything said about the school that’s not good is bad. I assure you that we are doing everything humanly possible to keep everyone safe.”

Oklahoma teachers rank second from the bottom nationwide in pay, with the conditions in rural parts of the state particularly bad. Oklahoma, like much of rural America, was hard hit by the 2008 Great Recession. This led to widespread job losses and desperation, leading directly to a surge in methamphetamine addiction and other social ills.

This immense crisis impelled teachers to launch a 10-day statewide strike in April 2018 to demand improvements in teacher pay and school funding, one of the major early episodes of a strike wave that began that year among public school teachers. However, as in other states, the unions—including the Oklahoma

Education Association (OEA) and the Oklahoma City-American Federation of Teachers (AFT)—shut the struggle down and cut a deal with the state’s Republican governor and state legislature, leaving teacher pay and per-pupil funding levels near the bottom nationally.

Larry, a veteran Oklahoma City teacher who participated in the strike, explained, “We need better control of the virus before we go back to work. We are starting virtually for the first nine weeks and then things will be reassessed. My virtual teaching has to be from my classroom. So I will be in school, but without students for the first nine weeks. I have considered what I would do if they send us back. Even the alternate schedule they are suggesting for some districts is troubling.

“I have been arguing that teachers are the ones on the front lines doing the teaching, we need to be the ones making the decisions about when and how we go back to work. We should have had a nationwide strike in 2018 instead of all the different strikes in different states. A nationwide strike would be brilliant right now. It’s what we need!”

Another teacher named Rebecca explained, “Oklahoma is first in the nation for the number of students—almost a third—who come to school with what counselors call ‘adverse childhood experiences.’ This means that their parents are in jail, they are on drugs, or have to work two or three jobs and can’t spend time with their children.

“The pandemic has just made America see what people looked away from before. As teachers, we

couldn't look away. It came through our doors every day.”

In May, Oklahoma Governor Kevin Stitt—the former CEO of Gateway Mortgage Group—signed into law the second-lowest Oklahoma state budget this century when adjusted for inflation and population growth, according to the Oklahoma Policy Institute. Both the Democrats and Republicans have long showered local industry with tax breaks and other incentives, in particular providing huge tax abatements to the oil industry.

Oklahoma, the country's fourth-largest oil-producing state and which hosts the corporate headquarters for Devon Energy, Chesapeake and other major production companies, is heavily dependent on the oil industry for state revenues. But the industry is reeling from a steep decline in oil prices and, predictably, the budget includes no new taxes on oil producers.

In the current budget, Stitt allotted more money for charter and private schools than public schools. He also sought to increase the Oklahoma Equal Opportunity Education Scholarship Tax Credit, a voucher program supported by Trump, from \$25 million to \$30 million.

“This is like the Battle of the Alamo. This is where we are drawing the line,” Tyrone, a teacher who works in a rural area said. “Public institutions, and public education, this is it. We have power, let's use it. I think a general strike would send the proper message.”

He added, “What I'm seeing close at home here is that suddenly what had been traditionally solid jobs, people are being laid off and you don't necessarily anticipate that happening. We are not essential, we are sacrificial. Why are we treated like this? It messes with our heads. About 350,000-773,000 people in Oklahoma applied for unemployment, but only 185,000 got approved.

“The superintendent knows to the penny what teachers will put up with, their enforcers, the muscle are the principals. My superintendent invoked God and said to the whole audience of teachers that everything was going to be okay regarding COVID-19, because she had ‘prayed for us.’ She mustered up tears. This cold calloused individual, she's really a numbers lady. She had very little empathy.

“A research study in Texas on the reproductive rate of the virus says that if two people enter a district the size of mine [with a student population of 1,200] it

would take approximately five days unchecked to cover 80 percent of the population. Face masks are not mandatory, so it's going to happen. Everything is optional. Until we learn everything we can about this infectious disease, we're going back in before we get a handle on this. For what? Who benefits? Why? It doesn't add up.

“I see in the reflection of our school leaders the agenda of corporate America. They don't give a hoot. They don't care, and that's what scares me. If that's what's happening in my small town, I can only imagine about the big cities. This is our story. In the end it's about the dollars.”

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