

September 2015

We've had a very smooth start to our school year at GPS. Our teachers and staff are hard at work every day working with our students to assist them in reaching beyond what they perceive to be their potential. Statewide, education is in a personnel crisis as the number of people in the teaching field has dropped significantly. At last count, there were approximately 1,000 teaching jobs in our state that are unfilled. In addition to those numbers, Oklahoma school districts have reduced teaching positions by about 600 over the last year. As a temporary solution over the last two years, the Oklahoma State Department of Education has granted over 500 "Emergency Certifications", which allow a person to teach in a classroom with only a bachelors degree in any field. This certification comes without customary requirements including training in classroom management, lesson planning or student teaching.

I'm happy to say that at GPS, we only have one opening (we expect to fill the position by the second semester, if not sooner). Unfortunately, due to losses in state aid, and our lowered property tax in Logan County, we have experienced sizable losses in revenue. This has led to elimination of eight teaching positions in our district over the last two years. I can tell you that we have had no option but to utilize a VERY limited number of staff members with an Emergency Certification, but the staff we hired, had already completed a teacher education program and had what I would consider essential training to enter a classroom.

Recently, a legislator penned an opinion column for one of the statewide newspapers regarding the teacher shortage and suggested it is a product of administrative costs outpacing money spent on teachers' salaries. This suggestion leads me to my usual question of, "How did we get here?" I will agree that the legislator is correct in his assertion that we now have more administrative costs, BUT WHY??? The answer lies simply in "The List." Noted public education author and speaker Jamie Vollmer published a list entitled "The Ever Increasing Burden on America's Public Schools." It names everything that has been added as an expectation of public schools since 1900. There were 12 additions from 1900 through the 1940's including Physical Education, immunization, Art and Music, transportation and school lunches. From the 1950's through the 1970's, Vollmer lists 23 additions including Driver's Education, Sex Education, Career Education, Drug and Alcohol Education and the school breakfast program. In the 1980's, 18 items were added including Teen Pregnancy Awareness, Early Childhood Education, all day Kindergarten and child abuse monitoring. During the period the legislator cites (1992-2013), Vollmer lists 33 additional items that are added expectations of school districts. Those items include HIV/AIDS education, CPR training, distance learning, inclusion of special education students and Personal Financial

Literacy. The programs that have been added are all worthy and understandable expectations. When paired with the growth in the last ten years of No Child Left Behind and the exponential growth of how we test our students, an answer to my question comes into full focus. These programs do not run themselves and none of the ones I listed are optional! Of the 86 items on Vollmer's list, only a select few are optional in Oklahoma. For practicality, Vollmer keeps his list updated online since it continues to grow. I have placed his most recent list on our website at www.guthrie.k12.ok.us. The irony of this entire scenario lies in the fact that most of these listed expectations originated from either state or federal legislation. So when the legislator wants to know why the cost of administration has grown over the years, the answer is to meet the mandates imposed in part by the body he represents.

It was also suggested that if boards of education were concerned about teacher pay and losing teachers to neighboring states, they should simply pay more and revise their priorities within their district. The most recent data available on per-pupil expenditures comes from the 2012-13 school year. Oklahoma taxpayers fund education lower than all surrounding states when it comes to expenditures per student on public education. Here are the rankings:

1. Colorado - \$10,686
2. Missouri - \$10,093
3. New Mexico - \$9,772
4. Kansas - \$9,689
5. Arkansas - \$9,384
6. Texas - \$8,324
7. Oklahoma - \$7,912

If Oklahoma spent only as much as Texas on each student, it would give our budget in Guthrie over \$1.4 million additional dollars to spend on what we have determined to be our priorities. When you compare the surrounding states, it is easy to see why we pay our teachers less...we have less to pay.

In Oklahoma we have been in search of the silver bullet to fund education for many years. Liquor by the drink, pari-mutual horse racing, the lottery...all believed to be the solution and all found to be little more than a mirage in the desert. The legislator also speaks of merit pay for teachers. Getting past the sound byte into the relevant details of teacher merit pay is always the challenge when speaking to elected officials. Ultimately, legislators don't want to own the details because they could be unpopular with educators.

I truly hope for the children of our great state, we can find a solution that is long term. The silver bullets I spoke of date back to the late 1970's. I lamented to one of our board

members recently that Oklahoma was in the bottom five in funding when I entered education and we are still there 24 years later. Over that time span, our legislature and governor's chair has been filled with a majority of Democrats and now Republicans. Regardless of the political affiliation in the majority, the problem has been constant and our children continue to suffer. I'm so thankful for the staff of GPS, they are true heroes that care deeply for those same children.