



This has been an extraordinary month for public schools in Oklahoma. After years of funding cuts and a growing teacher shortage, Bartlesville led the way to historic increases in teacher salaries as well as raises for school support staff, state workers, and more.

Years of state funding cuts led our board of education to begin serious discussion of a potential suspension of classes last fall. In February, the failure of the Step Up Oklahoma funding plan in the legislature led to a \$22 million cut in school funding, which prompted a 22-minute student walkout at Bartlesville High School.

Two school board meetings in February attracted hundreds of teachers and community members, with overwhelming support for suspending the schools to prompt legislative action. I contacted superintendents across the state to gauge the level of interest in a statewide school suspension. This snowballed until, just before Spring Break, the teachers' Oklahoma Education Association (OEA) set a date in late April for a statewide walkout. Bartlesville teachers promptly led a successful effort to accelerate that deadline to April 2.

Meanwhile, our local legislators indicated there was no plan at the Capitol to fund teacher pay raises or other OEA demands. So a handful of our district administrators and board members devised and promoted a fully developed plan to fund a \$6,000 teacher pay raise and other critical needs. Rep. Sears responded by pushing a modified form of our plan in the House of Representatives. The Sears plan, also known as the Bartlesville plan, morphed into a package of bills which went before the House in late March alongside pressure from the impending teacher walkout.

That led to a record \$480 million increase in school funding which was covered by new revenues and passed with bipartisan votes in both the House and Senate. It was the first time a tax increase had achieved the 75% supermajority approval in both chambers. Governor Fallin signed the measures into law, providing graduated teacher raises ranging from \$5,001 to \$8,395 for the next school year. A \$1,250 raise for school support personnel is also included, along with \$33 million in restored textbook funding and \$17 million for operations. All state workers will also receive raises.

The small increase in operational funding wasn't enough to impact class sizes or other critical needs, and the teacher walkout occurred anyway. Tens of thousands of teachers protested and lobbied for days at the Capitol, while over 500,000 Oklahoma students, about 70% of those statewide, were out of school. That prompted the legislature, again with active support from Bartlesville lobbyists, to eventually pass another \$40 million in school funding for a future fiscal year.

Our teachers' walkout lasted eight weekdays with classes resuming on Thursday, April 12. During the suspension, the district's Child Nutrition department served over 4,000 free meals to students, including over 1,300 to kids in the Oak Park neighborhood when the Bartlesville Salvation Army loaned the use of its mobile kitchen to Sodexo, our district's meals vendor. Local churches and organizations like the YMCA, Boys & Girls Club, and The Rock rose to the occasion, offering day programs for kids during the suspension. Dozens of community volunteers supported students and teachers, including funding daily bus trips to and from the Capitol, supplies and refreshments, and more.

Our Bruin Family is glad to be back in school serving our students. We are proud of what our district accomplished with the incredible support of the teachers, parents, students, board members, and many community supporters. Together we helped lift the average teacher salary in our state from dead last to just below that of Texas, offering competitive Oklahoma teaching salaries for the first time in my career.

The school funding crisis is far from over, however. We lack the funding to reduce class sizes, we must still rely on local bond funds to offset basic operating expenses, and we are still last in our region in overall per pupil spending. Our district will continue to lead the effort needed over the next years to secure additional operational funding to improve our schools with smaller classes, better materials, and meaningful reforms. This is truly a great time to be a Bruin.

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This column is online at [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1AG8Xln9Juzlurr\\_E15DtT-JnBp4D3nxdKNgb8Cospw/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1AG8Xln9Juzlurr_E15DtT-JnBp4D3nxdKNgb8Cospw/edit?usp=sharing)