

Education Focus

Oklahoma Education Association

Winter 2024

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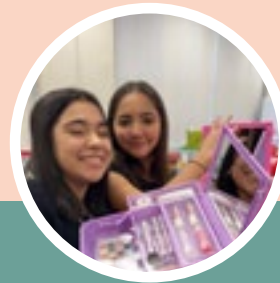


**ISLAND OF
MISFIT TOYS** PG.2

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The Education Focus

Volume 41, Issue 2

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PRESIDENT'S LETTER

5,783 - now one may ask what does this number mean. Would you believe that is how many school districts the state of Oklahoma had in 1918? Now stay with me because of those: 5,178 were rural one school districts, 408 were what they called "rural consolidated" in rural areas and 197 independent districts which were those in incorporated municipalities. Through the years, our number of districts have dramatically changed to 543; however, the areas where our schools are located still remain the same.

While the metropolitan areas often take center stage, it is so important to recognize the role that rural education plays in shaping Oklahoma. Our state's foundation is in our rural education system. In this edition of OEA's *Focus* we highlight our rural schools. There are many challenges that our rural schools face from being geographically isolated to limited resources which often results in having fewer opportunities for extracurricular activities, advanced courses, and specialized educators. The digital divide in our rural communities affecting our students' access to online resources and ability to engage in distance learning is real. As I have traveled the state, it has become increasingly clear the distinctive challenges that our rural schools face that require tailored solutions.

More than half of Oklahoma's public schools are located in our rural communities. Our rural schools rank 3rd in the nation in of racial diversity – 43% of rural students identify as American Indian, Black, Hispanic, Asian or multi-race. Our schools have additional challenges; Oklahoma has the third highest rate of students receiving special education services and over half of rural students are economically disadvantaged.

While the challenges are real, I'm blown away when I hear about educators and their resiliency. Our rural educators wear multiple hats to ensure their students receive a quality education. It's nothing for a teacher to drive a bus route before stepping into their classroom. It is important to recognize that our vibrant rural communities attract business and industries. Investing in rural education helps create a skilled workforce, economic opportunities, and community development. Our rural communities thrive when we invest and take care of our rural schools.

No matter where you live, whether it's the big city or your small quaint town one thing is the same – our public schools. In the heart of all of our communities where fields stretch to the horizon it is our public schools that are the hub that brings our communities together.

During this holiday season may your hub shine bright, and may we share all the wonderful stories we have experienced this past year.

Katherine Bishop

ISLAND OF MISFIT TOYS by Joe DuVall

Through determination and imagination, a third-year Noble teacher proves fine arts is a worthy investment for Oklahoma communities.



provide a welcoming community where students – who may not have found their place yet – can thrive.

Kevan Dunkelberg is a third-year drama teacher in Noble, a town with just over 7,000 residents and limited resources when it comes to the arts.

“It is definitely a labor of love,” according to Dunkelberg, “But it’s the little things that really add value to a student’s education. Whether you’re on stage or off, it’s that teamwork and collaboration that really gives kids who may not feel like they have a place anywhere else, they get to come in and find a little community.”

Being a beacon for wandering students still searching for their place to fit in has earned his classroom the nickname: “The Island of Misfit Toys.”

Former Edmond Santa Fe drama teacher and current OEA Early Career and Aspiring Educator Coordinator, Robin Robinson, sees theatre as, “So much more than soliloquies and monologues. It’s time management, critical thinking, organization skills, and most of all confidence.”

“It’s the kid that never talks and all of the sudden he’s cracking jokes and the funniest one in the room,” said Dunkelberg.

The impact of a quality drama teacher made statewide news when 2020

(Top) Kevan Dunkelberg, third-year drama teacher in Noble, OK.

(Bottom) Student performance of *Clue*.

Whenever districts are faced with tough budget decisions, often it is the fine arts that are the first to meet the axe. When those programs are cut, it is not only numbers on a page that decrease but also our children’s opportunities for growth.

Still, fine arts education professionals across Oklahoma make it work to





“

Whether you're on stage or off, it's that teamwork and collaboration that really gives kids who may not feel like they have a place anywhere else, they get to come in and find a little community.”

(Top) Noble Student Members of the Theater Club. (Bottom) Student performance of *Clue*.

Oklahoma Teacher of the Year Jena Nelson credited her Broken Bow High School drama teacher (and OEA member) Stephen Smallwood with saving her life.

Per Nelson, she was about to make, “a very bad decision,” when Smallwood stopped her in the hall and suggested she take that passion into his speech and drama classroom. Nelson attributed this moment as an inflection point of her path – changing her trajectory to become the first person in her family to graduate from college, become a state teacher of the year, and eventually a candidate for state superintendent. None of which would have happened, according to Nelson, if not for a high school drama teacher.

“I’m obviously biased, but to me the fine arts and drama is the field that really teaches almost every soft skill to our students you can imagine – teamwork, collaboration, creative problem solving, working under pressure,” observed Dunkelberg, “The biggest thing, though, that I think that kids take



away from it is empathy. As an actor, you figure out how to step into someone else's shoes. You imagine what it's like to live as somebody else. And that's a skill that translates to their real life, and I get to see that every day which is pretty cool.”

The benefits of teaching the whole student and its positive permutations through other aspects in their life is not a new concept.

Social emotional learning (SEL), and its five core competencies of self-awareness,

self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, have come under attack in recent years.

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Ryan Walters has referred to this type of teaching as “inappropriate.” In 2022, State Senator Shane Jett proposed Senate Bill 1442, which would “prohibit” schools from teaching these high-minded concepts of empathy and inclusion.

cont.

ISLAND OF MISFIT TOYS

"If I had a dollar for every former student that came back and told me that they used lessons learned in theatre/speech and debate/musical theatre to succeed in life, I'd have so many dollars," laughed Robinson.

"It's no secret that reading music is very similar to solving a mathematical problem," continued Robinson, "Students in fine arts programs are consistently demonstrating that they are succeeding and far above average academically. This comes from not just the material they are working on, but the fact that they are given daily opportunities to do something they enjoy, something they are doing as part of a collaborative group, and something they look forward to attending school to do."

Even though Noble is a small community and money is tight, Dunkelberg claims the support for this program has been tremendous.

"One of the things I've really tried to do with our program the last couple of years is build it beyond our little bubble. It's seeking out help wherever I can possibly get it," said Dunkelberg, "Fortunately, I have a really supportive administration who helps when they can, but unfortunately there's only so much money in the pot and there are lots of other programs who need and deserve funding, so it's tough."

This past fall, Noble High School performed a stage interpretation of the 1985 movie *Clue* starring Tim Curry. With funding tight, Dunkelberg, a self-proclaimed "geek" finds creative solutions to provide resources for his students.

"We did a schoolwide, Noble High School version of *Clue*. I hung up clues throughout the school and people could buy a game-card and play along with prizes for the winner."

For a show of *Peter Pan*, Dunkelberg sold stars painted with glow-in-the-dark paint on sticks in the lobby for audience members to hold up at certain points during the play.



This spring, they held a "Waffle Wednesday" and sold \$500 worth of waffles to pay for paint and set materials for the musical.

"We are pretty much entirely self-funded. The biggest source of revenue is the shows themselves – the ticket sales," remarked Dunkelberg on this beneficial program's sustainability, "We are self-funded, so we do have to rely on the creativity of our kids and the generosity of our community."

"We don't want to take away from other programs like sports, but I know most fine arts educators would love to see not only more funds, but more community and parent support," reflected Robinson.

If these fine arts educators and programs did not exist, students would still attend math, science, language arts, and social studies courses (though, not as often as studies show fine arts classes increase overall student attendance), but they would miss out on lessons in teamwork, creativity, communication, and a greater empathy for others.

"Medicine, law, business, engineering, these are all noble pursuits, and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for." – Robin Williams, *Dead Poets Society* (1989)

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“

I've made life-long friends and it's hard to do that when you're an adult”



Allison Bias, English Teacher at Longfellow Middle School in Norman, OK.

Teacher and world traveler are two things that people do not normally relate to one another but describe Allison Bias perfectly. Bias is an English Language teacher at Longfellow Middle School in Norman who in recent years became a frequent jetsetter thanks to the Global Exploration for Educators Organization (GEEO).

Most teachers have received at least one mailer or one pamphlet in their mailbox advertising special trips for educators, but many do not take up the offer. Bias was one who did not consider it until she heard first-hand experience from a trusted source.



LESSONS IN TRAVEL

Teacher explores the world with educator travel group by Monica Royer

“A friend went with GEEO to Jordan and loved it,” Bias remembered. “She convinced me to look around for a trip and we booked one for Iceland for the next summer.”

With that first trip, Bias was hooked. In the last five years, the bulk of her trips have been with GEEO.

“I was still in Iceland in June and I saw that they had a grant open for

a Greece trip, so I kind of applied for it on a whim and I got it,” Bias shared.

Bias went from a two-week trip in Iceland to another one in Greece in the same summer. She had traveled to the United Kingdom and Europe before but was intrigued by the variety of countries that GEEO offered trips for and the resources they provided. Through the organization, she has been able to visit places that she knew nothing about such as Portugal, South Africa, and Turkey.





"All the big trips I've taken have been with GEE0 because it's so easy, especially for places that I wouldn't want to make my own itinerary for like Turkey," Bias shared. "I probably wouldn't have just decided, 'Hey, I wanna go to Turkey in the middle of nowhere and travel from Istanbul all the way down the Mediterranean coast and all the way back up.'"

Although travelers must cover their own airfare, GEE0 helps make traveling to different countries more affordable through different partnerships with other organizations and businesses.

"They plan everything, and you go in small groups," Bias explained. "I believe the cap for the group was about 16 and you just get to know one another. Plus everyone is either a teacher or a retired teacher." GEE0 helps to book your lodgings, transportation, a local guide, and anything else you might need on your fifteen-day trip. The cost varies depending on which countries you visit, but they provide something that is difficult to put a price on: peace of mind.

"They are very conscientious of making you feel safe, and all of the accommodations are pretty



nice," Bias shared. "Excluding airfare, my fifteen-day trip to Turkey was less than \$1,500".

In comparison, the average trip to Turkey for fifteen days is approximately \$2,400. Additionally, GEE0 provides hundreds of professional development hours for going on the trips, grant opportunities, special discounts, and even partners with some universities for graduate credit hours.

Beyond all the benefits, Bias believes the most important part of traveling with GEE0 was the community of traveling teachers she met. Through the program, she has connected with teachers from all over the nation. "I've made lifelong friends and it's hard to do that when

“

We have a lot more in common with people worldwide than not.”

you’re an adult,” Bias shared. “Once people find out about it and you start going, you find this little community of people who continue to go on these trips and it’s fun.”

These trips opened up even more opportunities for Bias than she could have imagined. After meeting a fellow educator from Buffalo on one of the GEEO trips, Bias immediately made plans to travel to South Africa with her the following summer through the program. “I actually also went to Dubai for a week because the girl I met in Buffalo actually teaches there now,” Bias said.

Bias found comfort in being with a group of people who she knew she already shared something in common with. She believes it could help people feel less intimidated about traveling, especially if they have to do it alone.

“I haven’t been in any group where people had any major issues with one another, Bias shared. “I think we’re just all used to working with lots of different groups of people in education.” Bias believes that all educators should travel outside of the country at some point if they can.

“I think everyone should travel to get out of their comfort zone and realize there is so much more out there,” Bias said. “We have a lot more in common with people worldwide than not.”

This is especially important for Bias’s new role as an English Language Teacher. She has a deeper understanding for what her students are going through as English Language Learners.

“To step outside your comfort zone, to be in a place where you don’t speak the language, you realize, ‘What might this be like for someone coming to the United States?’ It gives you more empathy towards other people.”



She has also learned how impactful first-hand experience is in understanding what living conditions are like in other places. Although we may share similar issues, they can be starkly different. “In Africa, there are levels of poverty that we are just not used to in our area,” Bias remembered. “It’s eye-opening.”

It is easy to say that traveling with this group has had a major impact on Bias’s life. It has given her life-long friendships and changed who she is as an educator and as a citizen of the world. She plans to continue to go on many more adventures.



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THE GIFT OF TEACHING

ESL teachers help provide presents to underprivileged students

by Monica Royer

Eryn Caffey does not work at your typical public school. The students that go to Lincoln Academy in Enid, Oklahoma go for extra support – whether that be access to an extensive English language development program or remedial classes at the alternative high school. As one of the English as a Second Language teachers, Caffey teaches 6th through 12th-grade students who come from all over the world with a variety of experiences, challenges, and home lives.

During her second year as an ESL teacher in 2022, the school created a “Newcomer Academy” for students who entered the United States and have three years or less experience in the public-school system. This program was designed to provide more than double the supplemental instruction that was originally provided for English Language Learners (ELL) to help them acclimate to their new environment. After working with the kids, Caffey and her co-teacher identified that the students were facing more than cultural challenges and language barriers.

“We realized through the first year of doing this that the kids did not have a lot,” Caffey explained. “They literally came with the clothes on their back half the time.” Of the 35 students in the program, 30 of them were experiencing poverty. Many of the students’ families had escaped hostile environments in Mexico that left them with little when coming to the United States.

“The homeless factor for them was that they don’t live in their own house,” Caffey explained. “They often lived with another family member or even in a situation with multiple families in one home. We also started seeing a lot of single-parent homes.”

This was devastating news to the team who wanted to help provide for these struggling students, especially with the holidays approaching quickly. With a stroke of luck, the school was contacted by Youth and Family Services who asked if they had a list of students for whom they could help provide Christmas gifts. Caffey knew that she had a large number of students in need but took the chance.

“I looked at the person who was coordinating this for us and I said, ‘We have 35. Can we do 35?’” Caffey

recalled. “She said, ‘Let me get back to you’, and when they said ‘yes’ we were so thankful.”

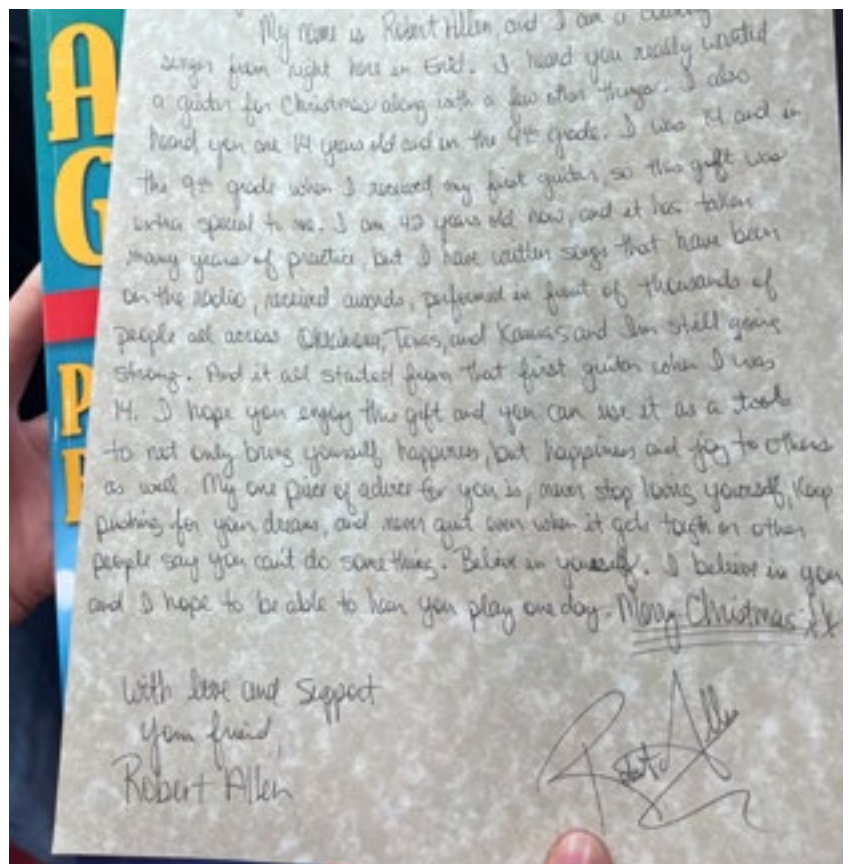
Caffey and her coworkers had the students create wish lists as a writing activity to avoid revealing the surprise. They passed the requests off to the Youth and Family Services without knowing what the outcome would be.

“We actually had so many gifts that we had to take them down to the teachers’ lounge,” Caffey explained. “We had so many volunteers to help set it all up. We had different spots for every kid.”

Once everything was set up, the kids were led to the lounge with volunteers, staff members, and administrators eagerly awaiting their reactions.

“The kids had no idea,” Caffey shared. “I have video of them walking in with their faces lighting up because they see presents everywhere and had no idea what was going on.”

There was an immense amount of joy and chaos as the kids each opened four to five presents at once. However, in the midst of it all, one gift stood out to everyone.





"There was one student in particular who brought everyone in the room to tears," Caffey remembered. "He put on his list that he wanted a guitar. He loved playing it, but he didn't have one of his own and those are not easy gifts to come by."

This student had a single mom who worked nights and did everything she could to care for him and his siblings. "One of the local music artists donated one of his guitars for this student," Caffey explained. "He enclosed a letter about how he was also a kid with a single mom, and he was thankful because someone gave him a guitar and it spawned his music career."

Upon opening this gift, everyone in the room was emotional. "Tears. Tears. Tears. Tears," Caffey recalled. "Even the kid felt how special it was... It really meant something to him."

The gifts went beyond Caffey's students. Although the ELL students reside upstairs at Lincoln Academy, downstairs is the district's alternative

high school.

"[Those students] have similar stories," Caffey explained. "They come from homelessness, drug addicted families...circumstances of life that at 15, 16, 17 years old you should not be dealing with."

Caffey and her coworkers realized that not all students celebrate Christmas, but wanted to make sure they were included. "We had a student who was a Jehovah's Witness who did not celebrate Christmas," Caffey explained. "We contacted her mom and let her know that we were working with a group who wanted to provide her with things to do and that we understood that it wouldn't be given as a Christmas present or wrapped like the rest of the kids. Her mom agreed and she was able to participate with the rest of the group."

This experience was not just impactful on the students and their

“

We realized ... the kids did not have a lot...They literally came with the clothes on their back half the time.”



lives but changed the dynamic of their relationships with their teachers. Although Caffey and her team made sure the kids understood that this was a community effort and not just done by them, it ultimately brought them closer together. "I think it allowed them to trust us a little bit more," Caffey reflected. "Relationships are always important in the

classroom no matter what you teach. I think they built the idea of, 'This is a safe person. They really do care about me. They listened.'"

Although the students eventually graduate from the program and return to their regular school sites, they continue to hold on to something special.

"I can walk into any of the buildings and find those kids and know that have a better bond with those kids than any other kids that I've taught," Caffey added. With the success of the previous year, Caffey received the news that they will be able to work with Family Youth and Services again this year to provide a new group of kids with presents. This experience showed Caffey and

her coworkers that the greatest gift you can give is simply letting someone know that they are seen, heard, and loved.

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2023 ESP Fall Conference

Featuring National
ESP of the Year,
Pamella Johnson

By Brendan Jarvis



(Circle) Pamella Johnson, National ESP of the Year giving her Keynote. (Bottom) 2023 ESP Conference participants

OEA's annual ESP Conference was held on November 18th at the Ronald J. Norick Downtown Library in Oklahoma City. Education Support Professionals from around the state came to increase their knowledge about issues affecting ESPs and to learn more about organizing for power in their local associations and with the state legislature. The keynote speaker was the NEA ESP of the Year Pamella Johnson, who travelled from Washington state to speak. She talked about her journey as a support professional and about how important they are to school communities. She discussed

the importance of ESPs advocating for themselves and becoming leaders among their peers. OKC Metro Organizer Amber Spradlin presented on the importance of telling your story and attendees worked on developing their own presentations and practiced with a partner. Tulsa Metro Organizer Brendan Jarvis followed up with techniques on effective one-on-one communication for the purpose of organizing and recruiting. ESPs also participated in roundtable discussions, with a session on how to approach legislative advocacy with special guest, Senator Julia Kirt from OKC. OREA Executive Director Sabra Tucker led a session on retirement planning. Tulsa Metro Advocate Jon Piguet spoke with members about effective advocacy in local



associations. AJ Stegall and Paige Goad from OEA's Communications Center assisted members with navigating the OEA website and getting the most out of member benefits. The two ESPs who are on the OEA Board of Directors, Kathy Hale and Dusty Livingston, spoke to members about NEA's Early Leadership Institute and the ESP Bill of Rights. Kathy and Dusty are leading the effort to create an ESP Bill of Rights for Oklahoma. Many members at the conference applied for the Early Leadership Institute, as well. The ESPs who attended felt that the conference was helpful and enjoyable. Putnam City Education Support Professionals Association president Kathy Hale said, "the conference this year had so much information. We learned about member benefits, TRS, advocacy, and how and when to talk to legislators. Everything I learned will benefit me and my local, as I can share with them. The conference just keeps getting better and better!". OEA President Katherine Bishop and Executive Director Carolyn Crowder also attended the conference and expressed their gratitude to the ESPs who attended.



(Top) Carolyn Crowder, Zach Grimm, Pamella Johnson, Sen. Julia Kirt, Katherine Bishop. (Below) ESP Participants enjoy a presentation.



(Top) ESP Board Member Kathy Hale chats about NEA Early Leadership Institute
(Circle) Amber Spradlin talks about telling your story.





Legislative PRIMER AND DATES

by Tyler Outlaw

The 2024 Legislative Session will begin at noon on Monday, February 5th, shortly after Governor Kevin Stitt delivers his sixth State of the State address. This will be the second and final session of this two-year cycle, meaning a number of bills that are still "alive" from last session could begin to move again come February.

Some of these bills could go a long way to address the educator shortage we find ourselves in. Language in some of these bills would:

1. **Raise support staff pay**
2. **Add years 26 to 35 to the state minimum salary schedule**
3. **Create an Employee Assistance Program for educators similar to the program made available to public employees.**

On the other hand, there are a few bills with language that are concerning, including bills targeting teachers' right to payroll deduct their dues and a few bills that contain merit pay language. These are just a few of the bills that are still alive from last session. We'll begin to see new bills starting January 18th at 4pm, which is the Bill Introduction Deadline.

In addition to passing bills this session, both chambers will have to consider who will lead them into the 2025 session cycle. Both the Speaker of the House, Charles McCall (R-Atoka), and Senate president pro tempore, Greg Treat (R-OKC) are in their final year at the capitol because of term limits. It will be up to the House and Senate Republican caucuses to decide who will lead them in their respective chambers

after this upcoming session.

Your OEA Legislative Team will continue to work tirelessly to advocate for pro-public education policies, but we would love for you to join us at the capitol. Beginning in March, Civication at the Capitol will return and we are hopeful that the program will continue to grow as it has over the last two sessions. We already have days planned for ESP members (March 19th) and NEON (March 25th and 26th). Civication at Home has also started and will continue throughout early 2024.

The relationships that our members have with their legislators are paramount to building on our wins over the last few years. We hope to see you there!

LEGISLATIVE TEAM



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Scan for Dashboard

What?

The OEA Legislative Directory was created to serve as a guide for members to browse a list of Oklahoma legislators, their districts, their contact information and to stay updated on key education issues during legislative session.

Where?

You can find the dashboard in the members area of OKEA.ORG -- When session begins this will be where to find all the latest up-to-date news coming from the capitol. www.okea.org/stay-informed/legislative-dashboard

Why?

This guide contains the stances of the OEA Fund for Children and Public Education (FCPE) on all current Oklahoma education issues and each legislator's recommendation status. All legislators previously recommended by the OEA FCPE are indicated on this guide. The OEA FCPE is a member driven political action committee that runs on voluntary donations from OEA members.

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