

# Education Focus

Oklahoma Education Association

Spring 2024

*Pg.2 Jack of all Trades*

*Pg. 10 Worth it Story!*

*Pg. 12 The Truth behind  
AutoPay*

**THE FUTURE IS  
STEAM** PG.6

Table of CONTENTS

- 1President’s Letter  
“Doin’ the Work...”
- 2Jack of All Trades  
From Surfing to Seminole: One OEA Member Still Adapting in 57th Year of Teaching
- 6The Future is STEAM  
Veteran teacher sees the power in combining Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics for students

- 10Worth It! Your Story Your Words  
Jasmine Quiñónez is an English I and Spanish I teacher at Purcell High School.
- 12The Truth Behind AutoPay  
An overview of why the push for AutoPay.
- 12OREA Spotlight  
Oklahoma Retired Educators Association Member Spotlight.
- 14ESP Spotlight  
Educational Support Professional Spotlight: Irene Welch



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The Education Focus  
Volume 41, Issue 3

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PRESIDENT’S LETTER

If I were to write a title for my President’s column it would be, “Doin’ the Work...” If I just say OEA members are “Doin’ the Work” you would say, “tell me more!” Each and every one of you gets up every morning, puts your feet on the floor, and goes to your respective schools or work sites to do the work. I know this because you’ve told me how incredible, fulfilling, empowering, and even heart wrenching and exhausting your work is for our students. And each day you do it again. I’m overwhelmed by your courage, tenacity, and resolve that you put into various assignments that are vital for our public schools to succeed. Because of you, the students of Oklahoma have a great public school to attend. Some think that you just clock in and out each day, but you are doing so much more. Take some time to reflect with me on the work that you as association members have been doing.

You have been Doin’ the Work to build a stronger association. Three years ago, our association implemented our Year Round Organizing plan. This plan specifically focuses on membership and providing locals with the resources to give incentive rebates to all new members that joined. OEA has provided incentive rebates to our members that helped plan and implement their back-to-school programs. Because of your work, our association has seen a significant membership increase each year, which means our voice is stronger. It is because of your work that we have made these gains.

You have been Doin’ the Work to build lobbying capacity at the state Capitol and

in your locals. For example, our Civication dinners have been at max capacity and the opportunity for members to just have time to sit down with their respective legislators has been priceless. Each year, our dinners have been the hot spot before and during our legislative sessions. More members are coming out and being actively engaged. Don’t forget about our Tuesday Civication at the Capitol. These events have been highly successful, and legislators have commented to me that they are so excited to see our educators face to face. The relationships that you have built with your legislators do not go unnoticed. Legislators use your stories on their chamber floors during their debates to make sure that there are pro-public education bills being passed. And in most recent months, you have also seen the importance of building relationships with members on the State Board of Education. Don’t stop telling your stories and being the voice for your students.

You have been Doin’ the Work in your local communities with school board elections. You have seen that now, more than ever, our local school boards have to have pro-public education members who are there to serve our public schools not dismantle them. I’ve watched how you have worked with your members and community to find out where opportunities lie, and power-mapped key players who need to be involved. You have made sure that your members are knowledgeable of the candidates through public forums and questionnaires. In many of our locals, it is our own members that are stepping up and running for these key positions. Look at the work you have done.

Mahatma Gandhi once said, “Your words become your actions”. This is a quote that we use as an association. OEA, you have lived up to this mantra by Doin’ the Work on a daily basis for our profession, our association and most importantly our students.

Katherine Bishop



# JACK OF ALL TRADES

by Joe DuVall

From Surfing to Seminole: One OEA Member Still Adapting in 57th Year of Teaching



If you visited a Seminole track meet, you might not realize the humble, unassuming 70-something-year-old middle school coach with a subtle and soothing Oklahoma drawl was once a bodysurfing teenager on the beaches of Orange County, California.

Jack Tinsley would have never predicted how his life and career would unfold, but he has enjoyed each development due to his adeptness in adaptation. After spending his youth swimming, surfing, and playing water polo at Huntington Beach, Tinsley and his family moved to Oklahoma, where

the nearest beach is an eight-hour drive away.

As a boy, Tinsley always imagined himself attending nearby Southern California University. However, he adapted to his new surroundings and quickly immersed himself as a student at Northeastern State University.

“I was getting ready to go start my master’s work. It was a midterm, so I was living with two coaches there in Tahlequah and I get a call from a vice principal, and he says, ‘Jack, do you want a job?’”

Tinsley assumed they meant to perform odd jobs around the building.

“I thought I was going to help with the grounds and then he tells me he’s offering me a position as a teacher.”

57 years later, Jack is still teaching.

In that time, Tinsley has taught physical science, social studies, United States history, world history, Oklahoma history, geography, English, economics, and physical education. He has also coached basketball, football, track and field, and cross country.

One night early in his career at a Tahlequah football game, Jack noticed a young lady in the crowd and decided to spark a conversation.



“We got to talking a little bit. And when I went back to school that Monday, her sister said, ‘Do you think my sister was pretty, Coach Tinsley?’ I said, ‘Yes, she’s very pretty.’”

In April 2024, Jack and Lajuana Tinsley, both Cherokee citizens, celebrated their 55-year anniversary.

And despite a nine-year stint together in California, where Tinsley was earning three times the salary teaching, the couple returned to Oklahoma where Jack could be a social studies teacher and coach. “My wife is an Oklahoma girl,” Tinsley admitted, “She was getting tired of California and the beaches.”

“Well, she didn’t get tired,” Tinsley corrected, “She’s just into small town stuff. She liked (California), but her family was back (in Oklahoma). So, we got offered a good job, got a good house.”

48 years later, they still live in that very same house.



After realizing Seminole had no girls cross country team, Tinsley created one. As head coach, he led them to a state title in the program’s third year of existence.

“That was a special group of girls,” Tinsley recalled, “They were tough. They were the type that didn’t want to lose.”

Tinsley claims he has taken a step back from coaching in order to spend more time with family, but he still coaches the

Seminole Middle School cross-country team and even helps the football team as a trainer taping up players.

Tinsley attributes his success across trades and decades to his most important attribute.

“I’m a good teacher in the classroom, and that’s what’s the most important thing.” And what makes Jack Tinsley a good teacher?

“Number one, you must know what you’re teaching. The students also must know you care about what you’re teaching,” Tinsley answered, “Everybody has a different way. You can’t say there’s this way to teach. You’ve got to be just you.”



cont.

# JACK OF ALL TRADES

“Number one, you must know what you’re teaching. The students also must know you care about what you’re teaching,” Tinsley answered, “Everybody has a different way. You can’t say there’s this way to teach. You’ve got to be just you.”

When you are passionate and dedicated to teaching as your authentic self, the students notice, and they never forget. When that happens, they are your students forever.

“I’ve been out of California for 48 years. I still have students from California who text me, call me, and I’ve had come stay with me for a week or two. I still hear from the kids from when I first started teaching there at Seminole. Every time I go to the store, a former student comes up to me.”

Even when taking a somber moment at the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. to reflect on those he knew who passed away, Tinsley was hit by the unmistakable call of a former student.

“I hear, ‘Coach Tinsley!’ And it was somebody on the clear other side, saw me, yelled and came running over.”

“And I’m going, ‘Shoot, I can’t go anywhere.” Tinsley narrowly avoided being drafted into the Vietnam War himself.

“I came real close. They cut off at 252 and I was 253,” Tinsley reflected, “It was scary. That was a very tumultuous time in American history.”

From his classroom window, Tinsley has witnessed that history evolve along with the passing generations of students in their desks. And while he describes himself as “old fashioned,” Tinsley has been able to evolve right along with the times.

“You have to just try and understand the students as much as you can,” Tinsley said, “And you have to have technology in today’s world. For me it’s been a challenge, but (technology) is great and it definitely helps

me do things in the classroom I couldn’t before. I’m adaptable.”

That flexibility is something the man who taught every course and coached every sport hopes his students take away from his tutelage.

“Have the idea of moving. Don’t be so rigid in your beliefs,” thought Tinsley, “That way you have a chance of seeing things. Because if you get rigid – I don’t care if it’s a Liberal, Conservative – you get that rigid you’re not learning, and you’re not going to have compromise.”

How much longer Tinsley’s career continues may not be up to him. At this

point, it appears to be in the hands of a high school sophomore on the Seminole pom squad – his granddaughter, Emma.

“She said, ‘Papa, you taught your daughter, you taught your son, you taught my sister, and you are going to teach me,” Tinsley recited, “And she’s the boss. That’s two more years, which would put me at 60 years. That sounds nice.”



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“

Everybody needs to have the ability to think in this world, offer solutions, engage in meaningful conversations, and inspire change.”



After 30 years in education, Tracy Wilmes has seen the profession change tremendously. He has taught high school art and math in four states. He has been a Fine Arts Department Head, Advanced Placement (AP) teacher, varsity sports coach, and even owned a pottery studio called Cup O’ Pottery. Currently, he is a STEAM Art Teacher at Heartland Middle School in Edmond, Oklahoma. There, he instituted an afterschool “Sk8Club,” sponsors art club, drives a school bus, and coaches girls’ soccer at Edmond Santa Fe High School. He was also a 2023-24 District Teacher of the Year finalist.

At the beginning of his career, school curriculum was completely different. The core subject areas and the electives were siloed. Over the years, the idea of blending



## THE FUTURE IS STEAM

Veteran teacher sees the power in combining Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics for students  
by Monica Royer

subjects grew, and Wilmes recognized its importance for his students’ growth and learning.

“Several years ago, while teaching math and art, I decided to transition from a traditional art education curriculum to a STEAM based approach integrating Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics,” Wilmes shared. “The idea came from trying to creatively engage my

Algebra 1A students by differentiating my instruction to be more application based.”

In combining multiple fields of study, Wilmes found a way to engage his math students so they could expand their understanding.

“My math students became interior designers and carpenters as we designed housing blueprints,” Wilmes explained. “My idea was to help students bridge the gap and hopefully help them gain a greater



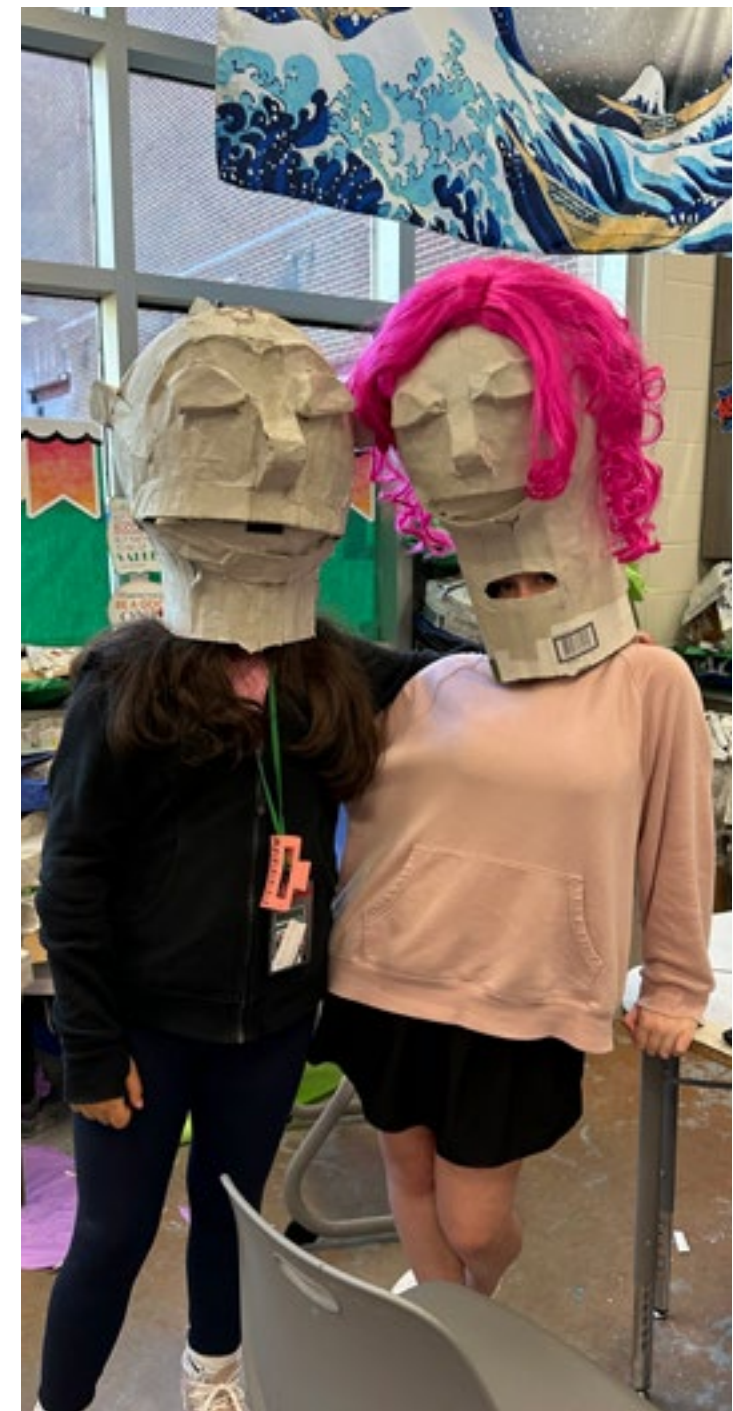
understanding between math and life in a more practical and relatable application. After assessing positive results, I then started challenging my art students in the same way.”

To create this curriculum, Wilmes began by assessing data from numerous resources tracking graduates entering college as art or engineering majors. Then, he reached out to professionals in economic development about what is needed in today’s workforce. “I learned that problem solvers and creative thinkers were what was needed,” Wilmes reflected. This knowledge shaped

Wilmes’ perspective on teaching. He had a broader understanding of how students could thrive.

“My success led me to figuring out an alternative way to help drive my academically lower student population to produce higher gains,” Wilmes shared. “Due to the limited number of high school electives being offered, my art program was the catch-all for many willing and unwilling students.”

With this influx of new students, Wilmes was challenged with persistent classroom management problems. He



recognized that the core issue was that they did not see the importance of their schoolwork.

“I wanted them to understand that what they are learning in school could be applicable and helpful in the real world,” Wilmes said.

It was not enough for Wilmes to see their grades go up and their interest increase. He also wanted to make sure they were prepared for the future.

“I want all my students to understand that there are more colors in the world than a box of Crayola markers,” Wilmes reflected. “Everybody needs to have the ability to think in this world, offer solutions, engage





“

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



in meaningful conversations, and inspire change.”

In order to provide the supplies necessary for the program, students had a basic art fee to cover essentials. Wilmes also applied for grants every year and has even spent \$1,500 to \$2,000 out of pocket. Although he faced many challenges, Wilmes had support from a great administrator by his side to support him.

“I am very lucky and fortunate to have Ms. Johnson as my administrator,” Wilmes reflected. “None of the awesomeness that goes on in my classroom would be possible without her support.” With an incredible amount of work and sacrifice, Wilmes has seen success in his program for over 20 years. Because of student buy-in, he has seen high completion rates on all assignments as well as minimal pushback.

“My STEAM program is designed to remove limitations and replaces them with wonder, critique, inquiry, and innovation.” The projects combine a variety of skills. For example, Wilmes has students create a large 3D self-portrait fathead to emphasize personalization, artistic design, as well as structural engineering. A biomimicry shoe design assignment required students to consider how one can learn from nature to produce sustainable solutions.

“I preach process over product because it levels the playing field between those that are naturally talented artists with those that are not,” Wilmes shared. “As a result, I am able to raise my students’ self-efficacy because they realize that regardless of their ‘artistic ability,’ they have a seat at the creative table, a voice, a belonging and that they play an integral part of our project.” In developing this program, Wilmes has also grown as an educator. The change has reignited his enthusiasm and excitement for teaching.

“It is energizing when my students challenge the rule of thought,

brainstorm, collaborate with one another, problem solve and work through trial and error to explore solutions,” Wilmes reflected. Wilmes sees STEAM programs as a way to change the way we think about education.

“Since education is the process of discovering something new that a person did not previously know, I hope we are able to continue the conversations about how important STEAM is to education and the growth and advancement of our community,” Wilmes stated.

“STEAM fosters creative thinkers and redefines our approach so we can create new and innovative solutions. Tomorrow’s jobs need creative thinkers and problem solvers, and STEAM is the vehicle to build a problem-solving skill set for our next generation.”



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# YOUR STORY, YOUR WORDS

Jasmine Quiñónez is an English I and Spanish I teacher at Purcell High School. In her nine years of teaching, she has taught ELL classes, English I, Honors English I, and Spanish I and II. This is also her second year of being an Academic Team coach.

*Worth It!*

One of the best things about being in the classroom is getting to work one-on-one with the kids and watching them learn and make real life connections with the work. This is not something that comes second nature to most. Having a very rambunctious and fidgety younger brother, I couldn't help but grow up already trying to figure out how I would help him learn. And that question has never left me. Every lesson plan begins with "How can I get EVERY student engaged and help them learn?". Seeing this question answered in real time, watching the kids grow in their understanding, makes this work worthwhile.

For example, my students have practiced the writing process through graffiti art on posters around the room, as opposed to the traditional pencil and paper process. Graffiti art posters have been our personal twist to a typical World Cafe or Socratic discussion activity. Students rotate in groups around the room and have different stations at which they have a prompt to discuss and respond with the classmates in their group. However, instead of simply discussing and taking notes students record their responses on the large Post-it posters at each station. Each student has their own marker and must record their personal response after discussing each prompt with the group. They are encouraged to use their own jargon and even use drawings to express their response (and penmanship is of no importance). By the time the activity is done, these once clean white posters on every wall of the room, are now covered in colorful words and drawings, or "graffiti". Instead of brainstorming and expanding ideas on their own, they can freely discuss them with others. And instead of risking writers' block by staring at a blank screen, they now have a jumping off point with which to begin, based not only on their responses but on the multiple available responses left on the posters by the class. This activity helps the students get excited about their topic, or the daily lesson, as they are actively involved

and not just sitting listeners. Seeing them get excited about their work and starting an essay is something special. This fuels our already creative atmosphere and creates an environment where expression is not only allowed but welcomed. Students feel this.

Students have also participated in group and whole class discussions - listening to them form their own opinions and learn to defend and stand by their opinion is exciting. You are watching a student develop into an adult that has convictions and a voice. Although you want them to recognize and respect their parents and others' opinions, you also want them to be their own individual and not just echos of someone else. Helping them find that voice is part of the job, and part of the reason why it's such an important one. As difficult as things get, being with the students reminds you who it's for, and why it's all worth it.

One of my reasons for becoming an educator is that I wanted to see more people like me in the classroom. I wanted to be that Hispanic, Latina, Spanish-speaking English teacher. This is the minority representation I needed growing up. Being the daughter of a Puerto Rican mother and a Guatemalan immigrant father, I had a passion instilled in me early on to not only be a person of beliefs and unshakable convictions, but to also be an individual proud of my roots and be a good role model for my community. To now have students say I make them proud of their ethnicity, I make them want to be a better representative of minorities, and even learn more about our culture and community, makes it all worth it. If just ONE minority student is influenced to do something more with their life and



for our Community, I will have done my job. It's not just about helping them form convictions and use their voice for themselves, but for their family, culture, and community. I want students of all ethnic, social, and economical backgrounds to see that they can be the difference, that they can be the exception to any statistic stacked against them. Those numbers do not define us.

Although I want to make a change for all minority groups, I hope to not just influence young black and Hispanic students, but all students who come my way. Every award and grant worked for has been for them and their education, no matter who they are. I recently received the Marathon Oil Unconventional Thinking in Teaching award and grant. This honor helped shine a light on what is going on within the classroom and with my kids. It also helped fund so many more resources and hands-on lessons in the classroom, such as our graffiti posters activity, our Poetry Cafe Day, Mock Court, Toasts for Change, as well as help update supplies for so many units like our Poetry and Drama units. It helped with these and many other things, allowing me to continue this worthwhile work.

Answering the question "what made you want to be a teacher?" has always been difficult for me. As my parents can attest to, I have always wanted to be an educator. I do not remember a time where any other career was even in my thoughts. I have always said, "when God formed me, he formed a teacher". This is what I was made to do. I don't honestly know if I can put into words how much I LOVE what I do, how worthwhile and important it is. *I want all my kids to find their calling in this world and find that same passion for a career that's worth it for them.*

“I want all my kids to find their calling in this world and find that same passion for a career that's worth it for them.”



# The Truth Behind AutoPay

by Rhonda Harlow, Ph.D



For years, anti-public education politicians have written legislation that would stop your ability to pay membership dues through payroll deduction and every year, OEA's members have successfully fought against that legislation. The idea behind these bills is strategic and purposeful. Losing the ability to utilize payroll deduction, forces OEA into an intense effort to move members to a form of AutoPay. In turn, OEA's focus shifts away from membership growth and the power-building needed to protect educators and public education.

Removing payroll deduction is not a new idea and is not only happening in Oklahoma. It all began in 2021 with West Virginia, where the state legislature passed a bill that banned payroll deduction of membership dues. In the last legislative year alone, four states – Florida, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Arkansas – all lost their ability to use payroll deduction. Based on this and the understanding that the possibility of losing payroll deduction in the Oklahoma 2025 legislative session is a stark reality, OEA decided it was time to take proactive measures and pilot AutoPay campaigns within a few willing locals.

Since the fourth grade, Linda Long knew she wanted to be a teacher. Now, looking back on a 39-year career and enjoying more time with her husband and five grandchildren after retiring, she thinks fondly of her time in Elk City schools. At the beginning of her time in the classroom, students were using typewriters. As technology advanced, she had to master and teach new word processing systems. Long reflected on how useful OEA sponsored professional development was for her during times of technological advancement.

During her time in the classroom, Long served as an OEA officer and as president of her local association for over ten years.

Now, she sits as chair of the government relations committee for OREA. When asked what she is most proud of, Long did not mention any of the accolades she has received over the years, but instead stressed the value of the relationships she built along the way.

Long was a business education teacher and thoroughly enjoyed teaching high school juniors and seniors during a pivotal time in their lives. She found joy in creating a comfortable space for students to try new things and helped them prepare for their next chapters.

As lucky as her students were to have a passionate teacher, Long's legacy extends far past her classroom. Long built strong relationships with colleagues, students, and legislators.

Long remarked, "...every political decision affects your classroom. As a teacher, your whole career is political."

Since retiring, Long remains connected with her representatives and has been able to cultivate effective working relationships with many Oklahoma lawmakers.

To those currently in the classroom, Long advises to "stay involved and stay the course for as long as you are good for the students, and the students are good for you."

AutoPay is where OEA collects membership dues, including local dues – if applicable, from a checking or savings account (bank draft), debit card, or credit card. Currently, if members payroll deduct dues, several people in their district's administration building know their membership status and know how they are paying dues. With AutoPay, membership stays between the members and the association.

OEA is committed to continue the fight but we if take a stand now, we are proactively working to minimize the lasting negative impacts of being forced by the legislature to move to AutoPay. Please be on the lookout for member incentive opportunities to "Pre-enroll to AutoPay" beginning in April. This campaign will give current members a chance to move their 24-25 membership dues to a form of AutoPay and receive a \$50 "Thank You". You will be hearing from members of your regional teams soon with more information. If you have questions before then, please contact Kim Holley – kholley@okea.org – in the Membership Center.

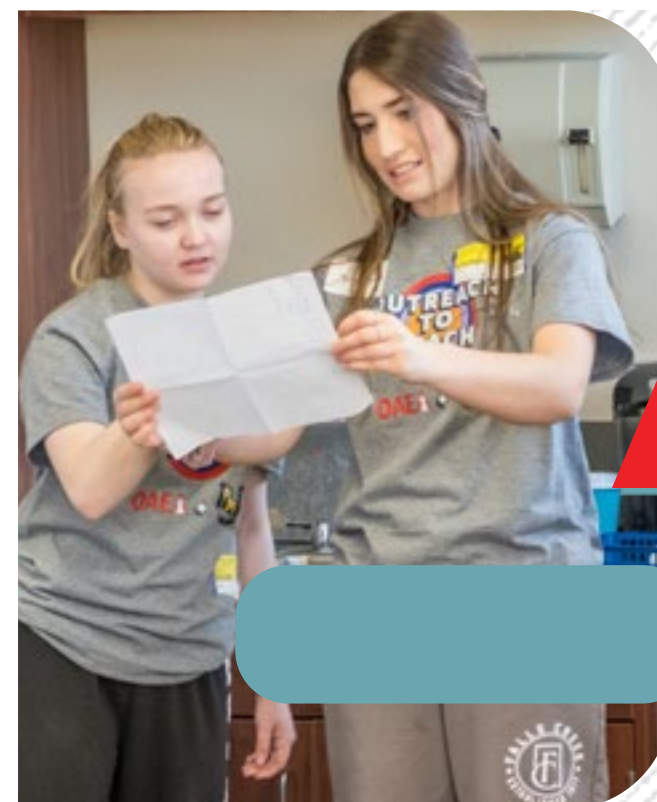


## OREA Spotlight

**Linda Long,  
Retired Educator**

*"Stay involved and stay the course for as long as you are good for the students, and the students are good for you."*

by Scout Anvar



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# ESP Spotlight

## Irene Welch Yukon Public Schools

*A support professional  
who supports other  
support professionals*

by Joe DuVall



Irene Welch is used to offering support.

On Wednesday nights, she helps her friend set-up a Bible Study course. On most days for the last 12 years, you can find Irene behind-the-scenes working for Yukon Public Schools as an education support professional – the last nine as an office manager helping oversee five separate departments.

Prior to working in public schools, Irene had a career in the medical field, but decided to make a switch when her home life changed.

“I worked in the medical field before, and I loved it. However, I was going through a divorce, and I worked like 10-hour days,” Welch said, “I need to be there for my son. I had never thought about education because I’ve always worked in medical, and I loved it.”

However, after a friend suggested she had the heart of an educator, Welch made the switch and has not looked back. Just like in health care, public education offered her the opportunity to help people.

“I love it; I help onboard our new employees, help them set up their accounts, their devices and all that,” Welch said, “I like the interaction with the people. I like meeting new people – learning their backgrounds.”

Welch’s own background inspires her to find joy in discovering the diverse, yet interconnected stories of the community that comprises Yukon Public Schools.

“My dad’s retired military and a Vietnam veteran, so I have that natural curiosity to learn about people’s backgrounds,” Welch reflected, “We’ve always been around different cultures;

my mom is from Korea, so I’m half Korean myself. I’m always aware of different cultures, and I don’t judge.”

Welch’s different professional and personal backgrounds help her empathize with those newcomers she guides through the onboarding process.

“A lot of them, they’re coming into education from other fields or they’re just starting,” Welch said, “We are a melting pot of different backgrounds and more and more so in our district.”

Even though her work is mostly at the administrative office with new educators, Welch still feels connected to those she has helped along the way and enjoys keeping track of their journeys.

“They’ll contact me or if they’re in the building they’ll pop in and say hi. I love to touch base with them,” Welch said, “It’s nice when they come back and let me know. It’s almost like a teacher checking in with their students as they go.”

One of her duties involves administering the State of Oklahoma test for paraprofessionals and, again, Welch knows no other way than to offer support.

“I kind of be the mom, the cheerleader, whatever they need me to be at that time,” Welch said, “Because I understand – I’m a nervous test taker myself.”

# CONT.

Even when new educators sit in Welch’s office for three and a half hours worried about the test, her advice remains simple and reassuring.

“I just tell them to take a deep breath, breathe, and I have faith. You’re going to do just fine, you’ve got this,” Welch recited, “I mean, our support personnel, they’re some of the hardest working, most caring, giving employees and they love their jobs. And obviously they do, otherwise they wouldn’t be there.”

Welch also makes an effort to look after these educators once they are employees and members of the local association. When there is an issue or a question, they return to the woman who was so helpful during their initial onboarding.

“Well, I always say that God blessed me with a big mouth and boldness, and I’m not afraid to use them,” Welch offered, “I hate injustice and I try to be an advocate where I see it. I’m bold and I don’t have a problem in standing up and some people come to me because they don’t have that voice or they’re too scared or just don’t have the courage or are just intimidated and I don’t and I’m not.”

For Welch, supporting others was ingrained in her from a young age by her family and community.

“If somebody’s car broke down, they would come to our house and use one of the phones. If we were eating dinner, my parents would make them a cup of iced tea,” Welch remembered, “No matter how small or how big it is, if someone comes to me for help I’m going to do whatever is in my power to help them.”



## 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 the website -- OKEA.ORG -- When session begins this will be where to find all the latest up-to-date news coming from the capitol.

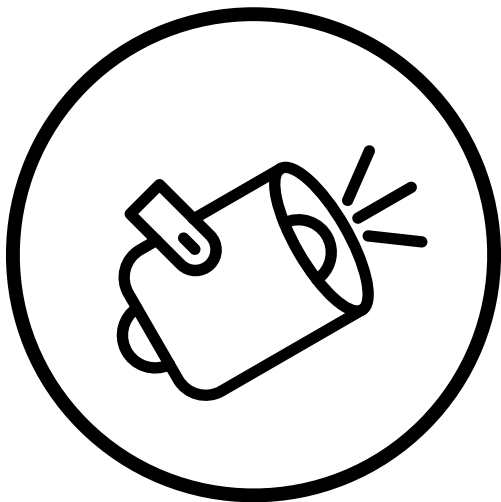
[www.okea.org/stay-informed/legislative-dashboard](http://www.okea.org/stay-informed/legislative-dashboard)

## 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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