


**The
Education**

Focus

For the membership of the Oklahoma Education Association • October/November 2015



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Sheehan named
Oklahoma Teacher
of the Year***

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On the cover – Shawn Sheehan receives the State Teacher of the Year sash from last year's winner, Tahlequah's Jason Proctor. (Photo by Shannon Cornman.)

The Education Focus

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OEA
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putting education first

Collaboration makes a difference

By Alicia Priest
OEA President

"Sincere and generous collaboration is the best way to fulfill the legitimate aspiration of each person and achieve great collective goals for the common good."
King Felipe VI.

Remember when you were a kid in school and your teacher announced an upcoming group project? You either started looking at your best friend with that wink of, "Oh yeah, we got this!" OR you shrank in your seat, mind filling with dread and impending doom.

Well, we all lived to tell our stories about collaborative activities; and, we continue to learn from such collaborations long after our formative years are gone.

In our schools, you set the tone for collaboration. Teachers and support professionals collaborate to make the best learning environment for their students. I had a conversation with two bus drivers at a back-to-school event in Grove. They were collaborating on how to set a tone of mutual respect on their buses and Pinterest tips for how to decorate the buses. How awesome is that?!?

Teachers collaborate with others in all directions of curriculum alignment, but

also for cross-curricular activities and best practices for reaching, teaching and inspiring our kids. As professionals, we set the example of collaboration for our students and others.

Our locals collaborate with administration to create safe schools for kids and safe working environments for the staff. We collaborate when we negotiate with our administration and school boards. We collaborate in our communities by partnering with businesses who know our schools are the hub of the community. We have locals that join their local chambers or other philanthropic groups, walk in parades, give books to children, help run the food-for-kids backpack programs and participate in any number of community efforts.

Likewise, your OEA Leadership team is helping set a collaborative tone state-wide. In the past few months, that spirit of collaboration has borne fruit. Because we truly value collaborative efforts and model that behavior, we have been invited to and accepted the invitation to work with diverse groups:

- Executive Director David DuVall and I have been asked to serve on one of Supt. Hofmeister's Advisory Groups.



President Alicia Priest

- OEA Vice President Katherine Bishop is on the SDE's Teacher Shortage Task Force.

- Katherine and I both went to a convening of states with a team including staff from the SDE to discuss TLE.

- OEA has been asked to supply names for several committees and working groups at the SDE and to participate in Legislative Interim Studies.

Collaboration is making a difference, but that's not to say it's always easy. In fact, sometimes it's messy and you don't get your best friend as your partner. But, there's no better way to be a leader and to help bring about positive change than to show up and speak up for public education at all of these collaborative opportunities. We must. Our students are counting on us!

We want to know more about how you're working with other groups to improve education for your students. Share your best collaborative stories on our Facebook and Twitter accounts using #OEAcollaborate.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alicia".



Why did the NEA endorse Hillary Clinton?

Rigorous process requires member input

By Alicia Priest
OEA President

Earlier this month, the National Education Association endorsed Hillary Clinton for president. While it may not be a popular choice in Oklahoma, I want all of OEA's members to know that they were represented and that rigorous steps were followed before the endorsement was approved.

The NEA has a long-standing, carefully considered process to decide whether – and when – to support a candidate for President of the United States. This process is outlined in NEA's PAC guidelines and operating procedures.

In order to be considered for a recommendation, a candidate must complete a questionnaire and sit for an in-person, video-taped interview with the NEA president.

The NEA President recommends that the PAC Council consider a presidential recommendation.

A presidential primary election recommendation must be proposed to the NEA Board of Directors by a majority of the 74-member NEA PAC Council.

The NEA Board must approve the PAC Council recommendation with at least 58 percent support.

The policies and procedures were followed and on Saturday, October 3, the NEA Board of Directors completed the final step in the process by making Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton the NEA endorsed candidate for the 2016 Democratic Presidential Primary.

Of the 24 presidential candidates, only three – all Democrats – participated in the process: Clinton, Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders and Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley. In an attempt to encourage Republicans to participate, the NEA hired a Republican strategist. Still, every Republican refused to participate.

The OEA Board conducted a video conference with NEA Vice President Becky Pringle at our September meeting. Our board members asked thorough and thoughtful questions and after the visit with Becky they broke into regional teams and created a pro and con list of endorsing Clinton at this time. Each regional team was given an opportunity to discuss their lists and ask more questions in an open forum. The Board discussed the issue for three hours.

When it came to a vote in Washington, D.C., in early October, Patti Ferguson-Palmer, OEA representative on the NEA Board, and I both voted "NO" at both of our respective steps. The reality is, that much of the debate both for and against the recommendation makes sense! Nevertheless, Clinton is now an endorsed candidate for the Democratic primary.

There are already those who are using this decision to drive a wedge – to divide and conquer members – within our Association. We MUST NOT let them succeed! It is completely OK for us to disagree about politics, but, in the end, the process was followed, the vote was conducted in a transparent manner, and our democratic principles were upheld. I humbly suggest that we use our time and energy on OUR MESSAGE – funding public education, reducing high-stakes testing and building up our professions.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions about this issue or any other you may have about the endorsement process. You can also find a great deal of information on the presidential campaign and related news at educationvotes.nea.org.

What qualifies Clinton ?

So, when all was said and done, why did Hillary Clinton receive NEA's endorsement? All three candidates who interviewed with Pres. Lilly Eskelsen received high marks for their stances on public education.

But in the end, former Secretary of State Clinton met every benchmark on issues close to the hearts of educators, from reducing the role of high-stakes testing, to advocating for early childhood education, to proposing a plan to help undergraduates pay public college tuition without needing loans.

By endorsing the candidate now that NEA members felt was most likely to win the party nomination and, eventually, the presidency, NEA hopes to have a bigger role in national education issues.



By Barbara Kinney for Hillary for America

Your involvement is very important

Patti Ferguson-Palmer, Tulsa CTA president and NEA Director, told members in a Facebook post that now is the time to become more involved in their professional association:

"The Clinton primary endorsement passed by 75%. We will hope and pray that this actually gives NEA the place at the table they are hoping for. I was heartened by the answers she gave during our town hall with her today. For those who are unhappy about the process or the decision, we can only move forward from this point. This is not the time to end your membership; this is the time to deepen your involvement. If we increase membership, we get another voice on the NEA Board; if we increase PAC donations, Alicia's vote on the PAC council has more weight. You can't change anything from the outside. This is your Association. Alicia and I brought your voice into the room; it will be everyone's job now to bring more voices into the room."



get connected



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"Alone we can do so little. Together we can do so much." - Helen Keller

Partnerships are key to success and the Oklahoma Education Association is dedicated to developing and sustaining important collaborations with a variety of groups. As a cofounder of the Oklahoma Education Coalition, we unite with other education associations to empower the profession and pave the way for all of our members to be successful. As a member of Keep Oklahoma's Promises, OEA is working with education associations, firefighters and other organizations to protect your pension. The OEA works closely with Supt. Joy Hofmeister and the State Department of Education, serving on committees and commissions to protect and improve the profession. We partner with the Oklahoma Coaches Association to let its members know we protect them in the classroom while OCA protects them on the playing field. To learn more about our efforts with these and other groups, visit okea.org.



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FOLLOW OEA on Facebook and Twitter for daily news, professional tips, classroom ideas and more. Connect with other members, share ideas and ask questions to get the most out of your membership.



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Collaboration benefits new teachers

TEAM wins \$250,000 NEA grant to establish mentoring program

Story and photos by Bill Guy

While the teacher shortage is being felt nationwide, Oklahoma students are feeling the effects harder than most.

The state had 1,000 teaching vacancies at the beginning of school for the second straight year. In addition, 600 positions have been eliminated for lack of candidates and budget shortfalls. Those numbers add up to larger class sizes at every level.

“When you are 1,000 teachers short, you have to think about how that affects our children. We are talking about 25,000 to 30,000 kids without a permanent teacher,” said State Superintendent Joy Hofmeister in a recent comment on Oklahoma’s teacher shortage.

Educators, administrators, school board members, parents and citizens throughout Oklahoma are gearing up to demand that the Oklahoma legislature and governor readjust taxation and spending priorities to appropriate desperately needed funds to provide for teacher pay raises – the state minimum salary has been stagnant since 2008 – and to alleviate the problems associated with burgeoning class sizes.

While not giving up on the task of advocating for additional funds, members of the education community in Moore are engaged in a new Peer Assistance and Reflections (PAR) mentoring program to attract and especially to retain quality educators in the district. Alleviating the need to recruit and orient a steady stream of new teachers could save the district thousands of dollars.

Funded by a \$250,000 grant from the National Education Association’s Great Public Schools Fund, educators and administrators at every level in the district, through a collaborative relationship between The Education Association of Moore (TEAM) and Moore Public Schools, are working to facilitate great teaching and learning through the PAR program.

According to Richard Ingersoll, professor of education and sociology at the

University of Pennsylvania, who has been tracking the teacher profession for years, keeping and supporting teachers is a much better option than very expensive and often ineffective recruitment initiatives.

“If you look closely, the vast majority of job openings are simply a result of people who left at the end of the previous school year,” said Ingersoll in a recent interview with *NEA Today* magazine. Too many teachers leave within the first five years, and the data shows that for almost half of them, dissatisfaction with the

job is the biggest factor. For beginning teachers, the lack of support is a key issue.

That kind of support is what Moore’s PAR program is all about.

“We are excited about the possibilities that will flow from the PAR program,” said TEAM President Elise Robillard. “One of our most important goals is to make sure that novice teachers do not feel alone as they learn professional skills.”

“We have blown the doors off the hinges in terms of collaboration and ac-

cessibility among educators involved in PAR, principals at all Moore schools, academic deans and administrators in the central office,” said Moore Superintendent Dr. Robert Romines.

“At the end of the day, Moore Public Schools, TEAM leaders and members and all school employees in the district are working toward the common goal of enabling our students to become educated,

productive citizens. We must attract and retain quality teachers, and we are totally committed to do whatever it

“One of our most important goals is to make sure that novice teachers do not feel alone as they learn professional skills.”

takes to foster the collaborative opportunity offered by PAR.”

Participation in PAR is recommended for all novice teachers working in Moore Public Schools who do not yet have a full year of teaching experience. But participation in Moore’s PAR program is also open to teachers who wish they could have benefitted from a mentoring program in their first year of teaching or who recognize their need for peer assistance and collaborative opportunities.



Moore teachers (from left) Mickey Key, Michelle Law and Sally Russell, who serves as PAR Collaborative Coaches, enjoy an activity during a recent training session at the TEAM office.



(Left to right) PAR Teacher Leaders David Wall and Caren Rickwalt work with mentee clients Emily Lindsay and Linda Sullivan at a recent training session.

Three full-time Teacher Leaders, whose compensation will come from the grant funding, are integral to the PAR program by helping to frame and facilitate the overall structure. They provide resources that include professional development training (informed by a mentoring program developed by the Oklahoma Education Association) and by working directly with clients (novice teachers and experienced teachers who opt in to the program) as they have time to do so.

PAR's Teacher Leaders are David Wall, 12-year Moore schools veteran who teaches 7th and 8th grade science at Central Junior High; Caren Rickwalt, a 10-year Moore elementary teacher who most recently taught 5th grade at Plaza Towers; and Nina Coerver, who has taught social studies for 10 years at Westmoore High School.

"I have so enjoyed mentoring opportunities by having student teachers work with me and my students as part of their degree programs, so it was an easy decision for me to join PAR as a Teacher Leader," said Rickwalt.

For Coerver, her motivation was working as a graduate assistant with pre-service education students at the University of Oklahoma, teaching both elementary and secondary social studies methods classes and integrated arts education classes.

"Supporting new teachers is vital to the teaching profession," she said.

Wall's decision to work in the PAR program stems from wanting to ensure new teachers start their careers off right. "When new teachers have a positive, effective first year in the classroom, it can make such a tremendous difference when they can crystallize those experiences, extending them throughout a lengthy career," he said.

The Teacher Leaders are now in the process of building teams of Collaborative Coaches, seasoned teachers adept in peda-

gogy, classroom management and other essential teaching qualities, who will work with clients throughout the district.

"We can parachute in and help set up site-based support systems, connecting clients with Collaborative Coach mentors," said Wall, "but it's the colleagues within individual buildings who will be most able to have the greatest impact. It's all about meeting the needs of the clients."

The plan calls for between 60 and 80 trained Collaborative Coaches for mentoring who will receive hourly pay equivalent to the district's stipend amount. Substitute teachers will provide the freedom for collaborative coaches to work with their clients.

"The peer to peer component of PAR can help lower the bar of possible reluctance by both novice and experienced teachers to acknowledge that they could benefit from mentoring assistance," said Rickwalt. "The support is entirely instructional and collaborative, with no evaluative component at all."

There is opportunity for the initial \$250,000 NEA Great Schools Grant to be approved annually for an additional two years for a three-year total of \$750,000.

"It is our hope that the PAR program successes in recruiting and retaining excellent teachers will ensure that the Moore district will continue to fund the program beyond the scope of the grant funding," said Coerver. "We're also hoping that other Oklahoma school districts might eventually be able to benefit from our experiences, using them as a model to design and implement their own mentoring programs."

GPS grant applications due in spring, fall

Interested in getting some of your dues dollars back in the form of a grant? The National Education Association funds programs to help enhance the quality of public education and to engage members with an emphasis on student-centered success through association-led efforts.

NEA Great Public Schools Fund Grants of up to \$250,000 will be awarded to local chapters and/or to state affiliates of NEA to further policies and practices that grow and improve the education profession by promoting and fostering student success in public schools.

Grant application deadlines are biannual, March 1 and September 1. The application process begins with the submission of an Intent to Apply form 30-60 days prior to the deadline to give the center background on your potential proposal and the amount requested. Then, applicants must submit a grant application before the deadline.

For additional details, guidelines and forms about Great Public Schools Fund Grants, visit <http://www.nea.org/grants/58935.htm>.

Ready to hit the road

Norman's Shawn Sheehan named 2016 Teacher of the Year

By Bill Guy

"I'm just a teacher in the trenches, who acknowledges the struggles we face, but is trying to stay positive and make a difference," said Shawn Sheehan, the 2016 Oklahoma Teacher of the Year who teaches mathematics to special education students at Norman High School.

Not a new comer in terms of winning accolades for his excellence in teaching and innovative strategies to improve the profession, Shawn garnered OEA's nomination last spring year for the prestigious National Education Association Foundation Award for Teaching Excellence.

In his position as Oklahoma Teacher of the Year, Shawn is engaged in traveling around the state to speak with educators and future educators, extending in person his social media campaign, "Teach Like Me," a project to enlist fellow educators to help spread a positive message about teaching and public education. (*For additional information about "Teach Like Me," visit teachlikeme.org.*)

A graduate of Arizona State University in journalism and public relations, Shawn moved to Oklahoma City in 2009, working as a job coach in the city's Dale Rogers Training Center, a facility where people with disabilities have the opportunity to access training that can lead to meaningful employment.

"I found it disappointing that some of these young adults were not fully prepared for life," said Sheehan, "so I decided to go back to school and study special education so I could have an opportunity to work with special needs students earlier in their formative years."

Graduating from the University of Oklahoma in 2011 with a special education degree, he has taught at Norman High for five years. He says his goal as a teach-



Shawn Sheehan spends a rare day in the classroom at Norman High School. As Oklahoma Teacher of the Year, he spends most of his time traveling the state as an ambassador for public education.

er is to help each of his students acquire a facility in mathematics and become not only good students, but good people.

While acknowledging the crisis facing public education in Oklahoma related to inadequate funding and a severe teacher shortage, Shawn remains determined to stay positive in promoting the teaching profession.

"As I visit with both current and future educators this year, I hope they can be inspired by my story of striving to push themselves to be the very best."

Shawn's message for legislators is that it is impossible to quantify the work of teachers.

"Of course, we must be held accountable for the work we do, but there are many things that cannot be measured by a standardized test score alone," he said.

If he had the absolute power to make changes in the current system of education, Shawn would make public schools the hub of their communities, with things like on-site health and dental clinics and

make social services an integral part of the school's mission. In addition, he'd have districts adopt a year-round school calendar, and he'd add an additional 10 paid days to the school calendar, with five reserved for professional development of a teacher's choice.

Shawn and his wife, Kaysi, are both proud members of Professional Educators of Norman. Shawn says he appreciates the opportunity the association gave him to immediately be part of the conversation around the policy and politics of public education.

"Being a new teacher can be overwhelming, so by joining, I was instantly connected to outstanding veteran teachers 'in the know' who helped me acquire background knowledge and get involved in making positive change," he said.

In addition to teaching a volunteer Saturday morning algebra remediation class, Shawn serves as a Special Olympics basketball coach and also volunteers in Norman's Big Brother/Big Sister program.

Jack Reavis

History, Muskogee High School

Jack Reavis is a true son of Northeast Oklahoma. While he had opportunities to attend larger colleges, he felt compelled to honor his Cherokee heritage and received a bachelor's and a master's from Northeastern State University in Tahlequah. In spite of opportunities to teach in other districts, Jack has felt Muskogee High School was where he was supposed to be.

He's raised his children in Muskogee and his wife, Lora, is a second grade teacher at Muskogee's Creek Elementary. Now in his 21st year, Jack teaches U.S. History, AP History and AP European History. He also is an assistant coach for the girls volleyball and girls basketball teams, arranging travel for the middle school and high school teams.

On what critics don't get about public education – “The importance that (public education) holds in our society. It's part of our fabric and make up now. I don't think we can remove it. I know there are calls for privatization and charter schools and other various methods of takeover, but public education is the biggest social experiment in our nation's history. Without it we wouldn't be who we are. A public education is an equalizer.

“We're still learning to live with each other. Public school teaches ... tolerance, to have acceptance of other people. (Through public education) we at least have equal opportunity to make something of ourselves through this system of government. I don't think the enemies of public education realize how fundamental a public education is to that ideal.”

On how to get parents involved – “Establish open rapport. Don't hide behind the veil of teaching or not having enough time. I've never had a parent not support me when I've plowed the field properly and sewn the seed of a good relationship. And they may not necessarily agree with me on some issues, but as far

as correcting classroom behaviors, they are always 100 percent behind me. If you develop a relationship, just a simple hello, and let them know that you care about their child, they will more than likely support you.”

On what makes for a great school – “Class size would have to be one of them, and that's really out of the teacher's control and district's control because it's funding-based. All the departments here need at least one more teacher to decrease class size. How do teachers interact with students. Are they present? How do schools handle nontraditional students. If somebody does need alternative help, what are the support mechanisms inside the school to help the student be successful? Parent Teacher Organizations, how

many clubs do they have. Technology, choir, debate, band, athletics, after-school tutoring, do teachers come in early for tutoring – those are all things that I'd look for in a great school. Community support is part of that. The number of AP courses offered.”

On why he is an OEA member – “Because I work for a living and the OEA represents the common working people. They fight for our rights in Oklahoma City, which the Oklahoma Chamber of Commerce doesn't understand that. Education is a calling. I'm not here for the money, and just because I've chosen to do this and live paycheck to paycheck does not mean I should not be treated as an equal in the workforce. It's important OEA fights for our retirement system and our health care. In some ways it's almost derogatory and criminal to be a teacher in today's society, and I think OEA does a good job in combating that image and being positive.”



Muskogee High School history teacher and State Teacher of the Year finalist Jack Reavis (center) with his daughter Madison Reavis (left) and Joy Evans, both students in his AP European History class.

Photo by Doug Folks.

Lori Hartin

English & Speech, Madill High School

It's no wonder Lori Hartin was named one of Oklahoma's State Teacher of the Year finalists – her speech teacher at Broken Bow High School was Stephen Smallwood, 1996 State Teacher of the Year.

“I wouldn't be the person or teacher I am today if it hadn't been for Mr. Smallwood,” Lori said. Joining Stephen as big influences on her decision to become a teacher were music teacher Annette Auld and history teacher Wanda Wood. “They all required excellence and I still feel that from them.”

After receiving a social studies education degree from Northeastern State University in Tahlequah, Lori taught a year at Savanna and one year at Crowder before moving to Madill. She and her husband, Brad, have two daughters – Grace, a fourth grader, and Claire, a first grader.

Lori teaches competitive speech, English II and pre-AP English II at Madill High School and is now in her 10th year in the profession.

On how to get parents involved? – “Make yourself available. The two best times of the year are when we have parent teacher conferences. I really try to find things to say that are positive about kids. Parents really want to be involved if they think you care about their children. You have to be out there. You have to go to the football games. You've got to go to all of the community events. You have to be willing to visit with the people and you've got to talk about positive solutions and positive outcomes. We all want success for our children; that's what we want.”

On what she'd change about public education – “I think we're doing a fantastic job right now with the money we have, but it would be unbelievable the results we would have if we were adequately funded. From a teacher's perspective, it just hurts me that we have taken the fun

out of education. We've just sucked it out, for testing purposes or just not really knowing how to engage students. We need to talk more about how, for so many kids, the learning is in the struggle somewhere. And you are going to have to struggle through this (to be successful).

On what she wants her students to gain from her class by the end of the year – “I would love for them to remember Julius Caesar and all the things we read, but I really want every kid to have a skill set. I'm not teaching literature, I'm not teaching the stories, I'm teaching skills. I want them to be able to solve the problems and make decisions and understand all of the different ramifications of what we're talking about. I want them to

remember that they can do anything they set their mind to. It requires some hard work and some active participation in whatever education or life thing you're going through. It's really important and necessary for kids to believe in themselves. We have too many kids who give up before they ever get started. We cannot let kids give up.”

On why she is an OEA member – I think OEA is a wonderful voice for teachers. I like the support that I receive from OEA. It is a great link for people like me who live in Southeast Oklahoma. Sometimes we feel like we're out of the loop a little bit (by not living in Oklahoma City), but I can get on the OEA website, or I get the OEA magazine, or I can follow the association on Facebook. I get a lot of information from OEA and it makes me feel like I know more what's going on around the statewide instead of just in my little corner of paradise.”



Photo by Doug Folks.

State Teacher of the Year finalist Lori Hartin (center), who teaches competitive speech and English at Madill High School, compares favorite books with juniors Roxo Avila (left) and Joseph Tuck.

Tony Flores

Music, Wiley Post Elementary, Putnam City

Tony Flores grew up in Houston, but it was Oklahoma teachers who convinced him where to plant his career.

“I found my home here, especially when I got involved in the State Music Educators Association as a college student,” he said. “That’s what made me decide I needed to stay here. The family I got to know as a college student made me realize I wanted to be a colleague with these people.”

Tony knew he wanted to be a teacher, he just wasn’t sure what subject. After changing his major three times, he settled on vocal music at Southern Nazarene University and is now in his fifth year as the music teacher at Wiley Post Elementary in Putnam City Public Schools.

Since starting at Wiley Post, Tony has filled the music room with drums and xylophones. Most of the instruments came from a DonorsChoose grant, some he bought with his own money or through GoFundMe accounts. Throw in donations from Walmart and surplus from private schools, his room now has about \$14,000 worth of musical equipment.

On how he connects with the community – “We ask all the time for people to come into this building and adhere to our middle-class expectations of, ‘This is how we act in this building,’ ‘This is what you should do for your kids,’ and these people don’t come from that background.



Tony Flores, music teacher at Putnam City’s Wiley Post Elementary and State Teacher of the Year finalist, with three of his students, Riley Shields (left), Karina Bobadilla (second from right) and Jeremy Mendez. (Photo by Doug Folks.)

So I make myself very visible at the apartments (near school) and people have recognized me ... because they’ve seen me over there hanging out with families.

“In the past, (Wiley Post faculty) have done the home visits the week before school starts, all 50 of us are out visiting all 600-something families. We try to take care of the whole child. Parents will trust us more if they see that we really do care about their kids.”

On how important music is in our testing culture – “We learn everything in music. It’s literacy – we read and write. We have to communicate. We use math skills. We use vocal science, we talk about history. It’s an extension of what they do in the classroom without having to sit at a desk and look at a piece of paper. We also allow kids to be more creative in music class which helps when they have to formulate persuasive ideas and imagery for

poetry. I think it’s also important that they just have (a creative) outlet.”

On what makes a great school – “Compassion. You can tell when you see a teacher who just loves to be a teacher. I think it’s important that schools have diversity so that we’re teaching children tolerance and understanding of different walks of life. I think a great school is not based on its letter grade or its test scores, you’re looking for teachers who are involved in the community and see school as not just a

place of intellectual learning and academics but a place of growing the whole child and teaching them life skills they don’t learn at home.”

On why he joined OEA for the first time this year – “Because I’m a music teacher, I have to join five other music organizations so my kids can participate in things. So, I’ve looked at it as such a cost thing. But this year, the Putnam City ACT did a really great thing when they negotiated that all out-of-state teachers are recognized for their steps earned in prior states. It just made me appreciate the work that happens at the local level. And I thought, that means so much more is being done at a state level and at a national level. (OEA and NEA are) giving the voice (to the locals) to have those kinds of conversations. My contribution is helping give other teachers a voice that’s needed, and that’s important.

Kimberly Paxson

Art, Shawnee High School

Kimberly Paxson has a hard time choosing her favorite artistic outlet. She loves painting, working with stained glass and mixed media. Regardless, she transfers that love of all things creative to her students.

A 2004 graduate (BS in arts education) of Oklahoma Baptist University, Kimberly is a mother of 4-year-old triplets (all boys) and her husband Kevin teaches financial literacy and is head baseball coach at Putnam City High School. She taught seven years at Moore High School before she and Kevin moved back to Shawnee where she taught a year of elementary art and is now in her fourth year at Shawnee High School.

Kimberly's students stay connected to the local community by displaying their artwork in area businesses and through their Random Acts of Art project. Throughout the year, students create pieces of art and anonymously drop them off on random front porches.

On how to get parents involved – “Think creatively, like have the student teach the parent (at a back to school event). It will allow the student to reiterate what you're doing in the classroom. Parent communication is huge. I also believe it's not just about calling a parent whenever you need to talk about an issue in class, but also praise the student. Anytime that child does something extraordinary or anything that sets them apart; sending out a text or an email or a quick phone call builds that relationship.”

On what makes for a great school – “A great school is one that has teachers who have high expectations for themselves as well as their students. You want teachers who create rigorous and thought-provoking projects for their students to be involved in. That is my goal – I want my students to not only learn the core subjects, but also world views and who they are, and find their student voice. A lot of that is done through the arts, so I'd look for a school that has really good art programs and drama and music.”

On what critics don't get about public education – “Class size. It is one teacher to 30 students a lot of the time. If you think about the time allotted for one, 55-minute class period, that's less than two minutes I can spend on each student. There's not enough time in the hour. You have to teach to the whole, but you have to know when certain students really need your assistance. It's a lot of juggling.

“And funding. I have to write a lot of grants for classroom supplies because of budget cuts. I really try to get as many supplies for my students as I can because I want them to know I'm invested in their education.”

On what she wants her students to gain by the end of the year – “The student voice is my big thing. I want them to take away an appreciation of art and to look at the world in a different way, a more creative way and a tolerant way. Just opening their eyes up to new ways of viewing the world and accepting those around them.”

On why she is an OEA member – “I think there a lot of great perks to being an OEA member. The union is an important thing to be part of. They are who negotiate for us. They are huge voice for teachers and that's an important component.”



Photo by Doug Folks.

Shawnee art teacher and State Teacher of the Year finalist Kimberly Paxson (center) checks on the Random Acts of Art projects of Eliney Tomlin (left) and Darbi Roberts.

Uncovering the truths of liability insurance

By Heath Merchen
OEA Associate General Counsel

Questions about how much liability insurance coverage an education employee really needs come up frequently. There are myths, rumors and flat out misrepresentations that permeate faculty lounges, e-mails and even some websites – all in an attempt to lure education employees into believing they need a specific amount of liability insurance coverage to protect their employment. Here is the truth.

“If a school employee is facing termination, discipline, pay disputes, or certificate loss due to false accusations, no insurance policy will help them.”

First, the vast majority of cases handled by OEA counsel are not covered by any insurance policy. If a school employee is facing termination, discipline, pay disputes or certificate loss due to false accusations, no insurance policy will help them.

However, as OEA members, they are provided full representation by OEA counsel without cost; that is a benefit of membership and is not part of any insurance policy. In fact, no insurance policy provides coverage for those issues. Any group who says their “insurance” policy will provide an attorney for these issues is making a blatant misrepresentation.

Second, the Oklahoma Governmental Tort Claims Act (OGTCA) protects school employees from any damages that are caused by the negligent acts of school employees while acting within the scope of their employment. The OGTCA even prohibits a plaintiff from naming a school employee in any lawsuit that alleges injury resulting from the negligence of a school employee acting within the scope of their employment and when a plaintiff does name an employee as a defendant,

the OGTCA requires a school district to provide a defense for any such employee that is named in a lawsuit.

Finally, the OGTCA limits the amount of damages that a local school district is responsible for to no more than \$175,000 for any claim arising out of a single act and no more than \$1 million for any number of claims arising out of a single occurrence or accident.

The NEA Educators Employment Liability Insurance (EEL) is a benefit of your OEA membership. The NEA EEL policy is secondary or excess insurance and

only applies in the event the school district insurance is exhausted or there is some dispute about

your coverage under the OGTCA.

The NEA EEL policy provides coverage up to \$1 million per occurrence for any claims against a school employee arising out of their educational employment activities. The NEA EEL policy also provides an aggregate coverage of up to \$3 million for any number of claims arising out of a single occurrence or event.

The reason the NEA EEL policy far exceeds the liability limits set forth in the OGTCA is that the same EEL policy is provided by the NEA to all state affiliates – and some states may have liability limits that exceed those set forth in the OGTCA. However, in Oklahoma there have been very few claims even made against the NEA EEL policy because of the OGTCA and the required school district coverage for any damages caused by the negligent acts of

school employees acting within the scope of their employment.

Even when there have been claims, no member has paid a single cent on any claim for a negligent act and the liability policy has only paid a handful of claims, none over \$50,000 since 1980 – when we started keeping our current records of these claims.

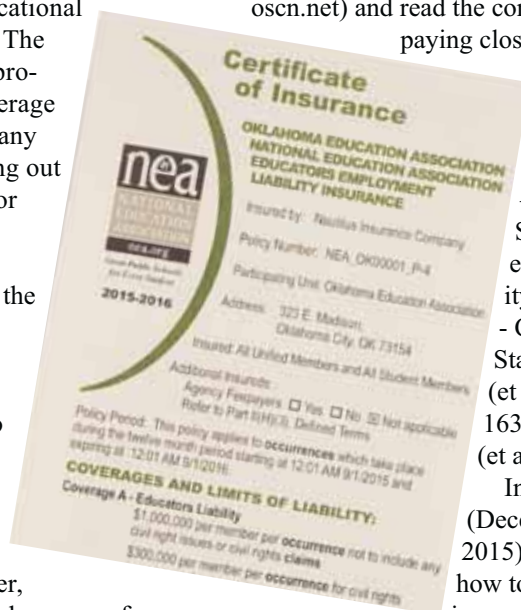
This is not to suggest that you don’t need additional liability protection. The purpose of having additional liability protection is to ensure that a school district provides a defense for any tort claim against an employee acting within the scope of their employment and to provide a defense in the event there is some dispute about whether the complained of actions occurred during the course and scope of employment.

Finally, the additional protection provides excess coverage for any claims that for some reason – one that has yet to occur – exceed the limits set forth in the OGTCA. The added protection is important; however, the amount of the protection is superfluous as long as it provides protection within the limits of the OGTCA.

So, there you have it – the truth about how much liability insurance coverage you really need. Still not convinced? Visit the Oklahoma State Courts website (www.oscn.net) and read the complete OGTCA,

paying close attention to Section 152 Definitions; Section 153 Liability – Scope – Exemption; Section 154 Exemption of Liability; Section 162 – Constitutional or Statutory Rights (et al); and Section 163 Venue – Parties (et al).

In the next issue (December/January 2015), we will discuss how to read a liability insurance policy, what these policies provide, and compare other policies to the NEA EEL policy as well as the other legal services provided by the OEA.



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