

# Straight Talk on Public Education – Summary, Part 1\*

Byron Schlomach

**“Our society and its educational institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling, and of the expectations and disciplined effort needed to attain them.”**

- *A Nation at Risk, 1983*

## Introduction

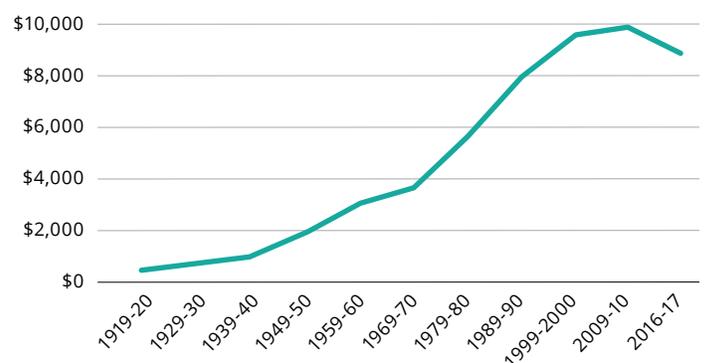
In 2009, despite a deep national recession, per-student funding and teacher salaries in Oklahoma reached an all-time peak due to a massive injection of federal funds. Since then, it is undeniable that public education in the United States, and specifically in Oklahoma, has seen a funding decline on a per-student basis. For a system accustomed to relatively small and temporary drops in funding, nearly continuous reductions for 7 years represents a considerable jolt. The truly big trend shift for public education has not been the decline in funding. Instead, it has been the ceasing of dramatic increases in funding from one decade to the next, starting with the current decade.

- Since its peak in 2009, real spending per student has fallen by about 13 percent to a level about 12 percent above what it was in 1990 (even after adding pre-K, and proportionally more students, since 1990).
- Today, considerably fewer than half of Oklahoma’s public school employees (>84,000) are teachers (41,047).
- The 2018 increase in education funding will bring Oklahoma real per-student spending to a level several hundred inflation-adjusted dollars below that of 2000, keeping in mind that the 2000 level of spending was more than triple the spending level of 1960 and nearly double that of 1980.

## Trends in Oklahoma’s Public Education System Emphasis on Numbers of Personnel and Spending in Public Education

- From 1940 to 1960, real (inflation-adjusted) spending per student in Oklahoma public schools more-than tripled.
- From 1960 to 2000, real spending per student in Oklahoma public schools more-than tripled again.
- While real spending per student rose 200 percent from 1950 to 2000, real teacher salaries rose only 33 percent.
- In 2009, real spending per student in Oklahoma reached its peak, having risen another 5 percent after 2000.

### Oklahoma Inflation-Adjusted Public Education Spending Per Student



Note: The drop in funding from 2010 to 2017 occurred gradually over the intervening years.

Byron Schlomach is Director of the 1889 Institute.

## **Absence of Academic Improvement, Combined with Poor Resource Usage**

- 40 percent of Oklahoma high school graduates who attend college must take remediation classes due to inadequate high-school preparation.
- In a book published in 2013, it was said that if Oklahoma were ranked as if it were a country in student math knowledge, it would be about even with Croatia and Turkey, ranked 81st in the world.
- In 2017, only 16 percent of Oklahoma's high school seniors were college-ready on all four of ACT's benchmarks while 42 percent of seniors did not meet a single college-ready benchmark. (Note: 2017 results are not directly comparable to previous years due to differences in exam participation.)
- According to the CATO Institute, from 1972 to 2010, while inflation-adjusted, per-student expenditures nearly doubled, SAT test results remained flat in Oklahoma.
- The U.S. consistently ranks among the top five nations in per-student spending but struggles to stay in the top 20 in international academic comparisons.
- Oklahoma is one of a handful of states formula-funding pre-K for all comers; only Vermont and Florida serve a higher percentage of their 4-year-old populations in public schools.
- If, along with 40 other states, Oklahoma served half as many of its pre-K population, there would be \$200 more to spend on each remaining student.
- Oklahoma's 4th-graders consistently score below the national average in math and reading on National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) assessments,

begging the question of just when Oklahoma's extraordinary effort in pre-K will pay off. (NOTE: An upward blip in 2015 NAEP scores were erased by 2017.)

- Since 2000, Oklahoma's 8th-graders consistently score below the national average in NAEP. Overall, the results are best characterized as flat.
- A great deal of emphasis has been placed on lowering class size over the years. There are presently 16.3 students per teacher in Oklahoma; in 1970 this ratio was 21.6. Given several research studies, and the fact that we are still getting 1970 level results, this suggests that the small class size emphasis has been a costly failure.
- Foreign exchange students consider U.S. schools less challenging than the schools from which they came. Given Oklahoma's relative performance, this must be especially true for Oklahoma's schools.

## **And Now, the Big Increase in Teacher Pay**

- In 2009, real teacher pay in Oklahoma reached its peak. Since then, it has fallen over 7 percent, less than the reduction in spending per student.
- The recent increase in teacher pay will raise the real average by about 13 percent, to a level well above the previous peak (by about 5 percent, although this should be discounted somewhat to account for current inflation, which is not currently known).
- The recent increase in teacher pay will move Oklahoma's average teacher pay to 11th in the nation, after accounting for state differences in cost of living, according to the most current statistics.