

# SENATOR KEVIN MATTHEWS

The need to increase Per-Pupil Spending and the positive yield that will result in Improved Educational Attainment

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Prepared By

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Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, and especially Senator Kevin Matthews, for the invitation to speak today. I'm Anthony Marshall, a teacher at The Booker T. Washington High School, a public High School in Tulsa. I am not here in my role as a teacher fighting for higher teacher pay. I am here as a product of the public school system of Oklahoma. I am here as an individual who has a passion for education, and providing quality education for all students. I am committed to young people. I sit before you today because I believe in Oklahoma. I believe under the leadership of our legislature, we can change the landscape of education in our state. In spite of limited resources, teacher shortages and funding cuts, I still believe Oklahoma can provide quality education.

I believe as we approach the next legislative session you will hear a lot of talk regarding per-pupil expenditure. I believe you are fully aware that Oklahoma continues to rank at the bottom when it comes to per pupil expenditures. Our students consistently rank among the lowest in academic performance regardless of what performance measure is used. I am certain that you have reviewed report after report that we are at the top when it comes to funding cuts for education. So today I am here to discuss best practices for improving per pupil expenditures and ultimately increasing student academic performance and attainment.

I work with numerous organizations that have various philanthropic partnerships to provide resources that will aid our schools. My emphasis is on providing quality education, particularly for those in low income and underserved communities, which has led me to look at the role charter schools can play in filling the void. Having grown up during an era when schools remained segregated in spite of the decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, I understand what it is like in a to be a student in a classroom that is underfunded. More than 50 years since the *Brown* decision, our school systems are still faced with the dilemma of providing quality education for all students. It is imperative that we look at how Oklahoma's incredibly low per pupil expenditure has negatively impacted our ability to provide quality education.

Low teacher pay has made it difficult to attract and retain quality teachers. Lack of funding for basic resources has forced remaining teachers to use our personal resources to supplant what should be provided by the state. Lack of adequate funding for schools has led to our students performing below average on most indicators. This has a negative impact on our state's ability to attract business and thus an adverse impact on the economy of our state. If we want to grow our economy we must grow education. We must prepare our students to meet the demands of the workforce today and to meet the challenges of tomorrow.

The education funding reductions Oklahoma has made in recent years hamper economic recovery, as fewer teaching jobs mean less business for local stores and services. And businesses that contract with school districts see their bottom line jeopardized, potentially meaning private sector job cuts too. Over the longer term, by undermining education reform, the cuts make it less likely that Oklahoma can develop the highly skilled workforce needed to compete in today's global economy. In multiple surveys, businesses in Oklahoma and nationally rank the presence

of a skilled workforce as more important than state and local tax rates when considering where to create new jobs.

Given the damaging consequences of education funding cuts, boosting the state's lagging education aid should be an urgent priority for state policymakers. But Governor Fallin and some members of the Legislature continue to advocate for tax cuts that would make it harder to strengthen Oklahoma's investment in local schools. Instead of digging a deeper hole by cutting taxes, Oklahoma should step up investment in its education system, the state's most important economic asset. I recommend that the legislature reject Gov. Mary Fallin's proposal to cut the state income tax and thus reduce education funding. I do support University of Oklahoma President David Boren's plan that would increase the state sales tax. This would boost school funding and help solve what he is calling an education crisis. We should adjust our per pupil spending formula to take into account districts that have a high percentage of lower achieving students. We must make adjustments that benefit economically disadvantaged groups that may have additional needs. We must have a fair and sensible tax policy.

It is fitting to review Oklahoma's current system for school funding to ensure it is meeting the needs of students. We must also align our education system with the jobs of the future, and funding plays a role in that debate. It is important to know where we are now to know where we need to go. The purpose of my testimony is to encourage our legislators to look at Oklahoma's school funding formula, the revenue sources for education funding, and potential alternative ways to fund education in Oklahoma in a manner that will provide increased per pupil expenditures in public and charter schools and create a higher level of achievement. In light of the recent passage of new legislation regarding charter schools and the exponential growth of charter schools in our state, we must include them in the dialogue.

One of the central issues addressed in most education reform efforts is school funding. The topic raises many questions. Do schools have the funding that they need in order to perform? Where does the money come from to fund schools? How is the money allocated among school districts? How do other states disperse school funding? Is the current way to fund schools the best way? What are some alternatives? All of these questions are asked and debated every time there is a call for education reform in Oklahoma.

This morning I am appealing to the Committee on Education and the entire legislative body, the governor's office and the Department of Education, to explore ways to increase per pupil expenditure in both public and charter schools. Since charter schools are public, they receive the same amount of per pupil funding as traditional public schools, and thus their interests are also affected by Oklahoma's low educational expenditures. With me this morning is Mr. Benjamin Feit, Chief of Staff of Democracy Prep Public Schools, a charter management organization based in New York. Democracy Prep has demonstrated success in educating students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds for almost a decade, operating schools in New York, New Jersey, Washington DC and Louisiana. As they continue to expand the reach of their

network, it is my hope that they can partner with Oklahoma to help us transform the educational ecosystem in some of our neediest communities. Recognizing Oklahoma's recent legislation regarding charter schools, it is important that we consider them increasingly in this discussion on increasing per pupil expenditures and the positive academic benefits, particularly for those students who are traditionally considered low achievers.

Although my written testimony is brief, I hope you will allow us time to speak from the heart and experience regarding several issues impacting per pupil expenditures and why it is imperative that we raise the level of funding if we expect to raise the achievement level of all students. Thank you for your time and attention.