

## ***EngageOK Thursday General Session Speech***

**Joy Hofmeister**

*(July 9, 2015)*

### **Transcript**

Thank you, and thanks to Superintendent Deering for your kind words.

And let me just take a moment to thank everyone who has helped make this inaugural EngageOK a success!

So why did we call this conference EngageOK?

We considered a lot of potential names, but ultimately wanted something that signals we've ushered in a new era at your State Department of Education.

Engagement, working together, being part of the process — these are central to success in education. Engagement is what we strive for in the classroom. It is what we want from parents; it is how we learn from our peers. Engagement motivates and challenges us, and sharpens our perspectives.

Providing a respectful forum for collaboration should be the goal of any state office, but that's especially true of one that represents and advocates for the academic success of our schoolchildren.

I'm proud of what my administration has accomplished in less than 5 months — particularly during a dramatic revenue shortfall — but we have a long road ahead of us. We will get there, I am certain, but building and maintaining a first-rate public education system can only come about through the engagement of us all. No one person or group has a monopoly on good ideas.

Through your engagement and collaboration ... we will elevate student achievement in our state.

This isn't a new concept. After all, it took the engagement of 15 women to establish free, public education in Oklahoma. In the summer of 1889, an organization called the Ladies School Aid Society decided to offer an alternative to the few private schools in what was then Indian Territory. On credit, the women purchased the lumber needed for a schoolhouse in Edmond. Townspeople helped build it. Five months after the Land Run, that one-room schoolhouse had 19 students.

How far we've come! Could those forebears ever have fathomed today's smartboards and iPads, flipped classrooms and hashtags for professional development? Could they have imagined this very conference? In many ways, the advances in education over the last few decades are nothing short of astonishing. And the variety of tools available to our educators is unprecedented.

But the fantastical can sometimes overshadow the fundamental. How else to explain the plight of Oklahoma teachers?

Let's be clear: Aside from the obvious exception of family, a teacher is the most important component in education. Their influence is incalculable. Teachers fan the flames of human endeavor — from engineering to the arts, medical discovery to space travel. Yet despite the critical nature of that mission, too many now find themselves feeling marginalized or neglected ... to the point that Oklahoma schools are in the midst of a historic teacher shortage.

I suspect everyone in this arena has been impacted in one way or another by this shortage. A toxic combination of too many regulations and too little pay has pushed many of our best and brightest educators out of state... or out of the profession altogether. I want to thank everyone today who has hung on and is ready to be a part of an exciting future.

Earlier this year, there were as many as a thousand teacher vacancies. As of this month, the OSDE has issued more than 500 emergency teaching certifications, a *5-fold* increase since 2012. This is a crisis in which schoolchildren are ultimately the victims, and we must address it.

I will continue to make our case to the Legislature that Oklahoma teacher pay must, at the very least, be competitive. And I don't mean competitive with Mississippi and South Dakota, the only states in the nation that on average pay their teachers less than we do.

The #OKHigh5 plan I proposed is simple and effective: Elevate teacher pay to the regional average and days of instruction to the national average over 5 years. It didn't happen this past legislative session, but the stakes are too high, our children too precious — our teachers too important — to give up this fight.

Fair compensation would help staunch the hemorrhaging, but it's not a cure-all. Sean McComb, 2014's national Teacher of the Year, calls "time and trust" the two most critical factors that educators need to do their jobs, and he's right. Trust empowers professionals, and empowered professionals know how to do their jobs unimpeded by excessive paperwork and regulation.

Later this year, I will appoint a Red Tape Task Force to determine the best and most responsible ways to toss out these paper mountains and usher in an era of trust, respect and efficiency.

And as for time? Already it is too precious to let it be consumed by largely meaningless standardized testing.

Today's EOIs are too costly and counterproductive to produce much of anything useful concerning student performance. Some testing is certainly valuable, provided it is properly designed and aligned — but what we see today too often impedes instruction and diverts focus from individual learning. That's why I strongly believe Oklahoma should instead meet ACE requirements by switching to a single, nationally respected assessment like the ACT, which 75 percent of our Oklahoma students already take.

Moving to the ACT would free up valuable instruction time and return to the classroom millions of dollars currently tied up in testing contracts.

We owe it to our kids to make sure we're being smart about how we spend their time. Motion does not equal progress. Accountability is important, and educators recognize its value — but tools of accountability should make sense and actually measure what they claim to measure. Legislation signed into law this year will help us ensure evaluations are valid, reliable and meaningful. Evidence-based research must take precedence.

As a result of this past legislative session, parents and teachers still maintain a voice — an essential voice — in determining third-grade retention under the Reading Sufficiency Act.

The OSDE now has an additional year to make sure that TLE is used as a tool for professional growth and continuous improvement ... to serve as a flashlight, not a hammer.

And because of a bill passed late this session, the State Board of Education will thoroughly examine how

to improve the A to F school grading system. If we're going to grade schools, it needs to be more than simply a way to *degrade* schools.

And we're making great strides elsewhere, particularly in academic standards. Dedicated educators across the state have taken on the mission of developing first-rate standards in English language arts and mathematics. It is painstaking work, but our standards-writing teams are pushing ahead admirably and within a very tight timeline. They are committed, as is the Department of Education, to crafting standards that ensure depth of knowledge, are properly aligned and reflect valuable feedback from Oklahomans.

I hope many of you were able to take part in Tuesday's town hall meetings or one of the breakout sessions on the current drafts of the standards. If not, please review them at the OSDE website at [sde.ok.gov](http://sde.ok.gov), and let us know what you think.

We want your input.

None of us are blind to the challenges facing education. Oklahoma teachers and administrators are not satisfied with poor NAEP scores or ACT scores that need improvement in math and science. We know this. Perhaps more than anyone, the men and women who work in our schools understand deeply the importance of a well-educated populace.

We all want children to have the opportunity for a good education. Urban or rural, rich or poor, Republican or Democrat — the desire for a strong educational system transcends artificial divides. There is so much on which we can agree, it is ridiculous to let political gamesmanship keep us all from working together on solutions.

That is why the OSDE is bringing together more than a dozen advisory councils to provide us with continuous feedback on education policies and system improvements. These councils will include superintendents, principals, teachers, parents, nonprofits, the faith-based community and representatives of business and industry ... so that all education stakeholders have a seat at the table.

It is paramount, however, that there be plenty of room at the table for those who are on the front lines, in the classrooms, walking the halls of our schools every day.

I say: Legislating about teachers? Not without teachers!

There is much to do, but there is also reason for hope — and I have hope.

Public education has momentum on its side like we haven't seen in years, but we cannot take it for granted. In addressing a growing teacher shortage more than 20 years ago, then-Governor Henry Bellmon said, and I quote, "We can no longer sit still while our teachers are lured away to other states and other careers where salaries and working conditions are better." Sound familiar? Governor Bellmon was right. We cannot sit still, and are not sitting still.

In my visits to school districts throughout Oklahoma, I see teachers, parents and students standing together to elevate education:

I see innovators like Union Public Schools in Tulsa, which set a goal of a 100-percent graduation rate and then developed a plan to make it happen... bridging high school and college so that students were college- and career ready.

I see Sapulpa and other school districts statewide taking bold steps forward with a digital curriculum that allows individualized instruction.

In Mid-Del and Deer Creek Schools, I see how a high-reliability leadership program for faculty and staff is igniting student achievement.

I see districts like Anadarko, Lawton and El Reno incorporating the strategies of business to enhance school leadership and structure.

These innovators of today are every bit as engaged as the Ladies School Aid Society was back in 1889 when they resolved to build up public education. And it is my charge — hopefully all of ours — to amplify these innovations, to share best practices, to do everything we can to scale the heights of educational excellence.

If we truly listen to one another, the brightest ideas will find their spotlight, and they will spread across the state like a prairie fire.

Oklahoma is in the midst of an extraordinary renaissance that has drawn national and even international attention. Seventh in the nation for economic performance... a median household income growing at twice the national average... Low unemployment... A thriving energy industry and growth in bioscience, aerospace and technology firms... A dynamic entrepreneurial spirit is fueling creativity and changing the cultural landscape...

Our cities are in the midst of remarkable rebirth ... Oklahoma City is turning heads with a bustling downtown, street festivals and, of course, the Thunder. My hometown, Tulsa, is undergoing its own transformation with projects like The Gathering Place initiative, growth of the Brady Arts District and potential river development that could impact multiple communities.

Oklahoma is basking in a truly amazing time of growth, but what is missing in the equation? ... A priority focus on education.

And sustained, long-term economic and cultural growth is dependent on what? ... Education.

Without a strong emphasis in education, Oklahoma is building without a foundation to support itself.

For too long, I believe, we have been spinning our wheels. Various components of the education community have worked to increase capacity, but these are different entities working without collaboration. The gears fail to mesh, and the productivity is limited.

Winston Churchill defined success as “the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm.” I like that. To me, that gets to the heart of what engagement is about ... shaking off the frustrations, staying focused and undeterred, dusting yourself off and getting back into the arena. That is my challenge to all of us.

Together we will elevate education, and more importantly, our students and their performance. Transformation begins with us. We must never settle for less than the best.

We must engage our neighbors, our families, our communities and our legislators, and let them know our kids are worth the investment. With your expertise, advocacy and dedication, we can do great things.

We can raise statewide student academic achievement and, at the same time, remind our fellow Oklahomans about the great things happening each and every day in our schools.

Our goals must be audacious — fearless, daring and bold. The stakes are high; our kids are counting on us, and we have got to get it right. And so when you leave this conference and return home, ask yourself... I'll ask myself...How will you engage?

What steps will you take this summer, and next school year, to elevate student achievement? What audacious goals are you ready to tackle?

Nothing worthwhile is easy, and nothing is more worthwhile than education. Education changes the world. You are changing the world. Let's stay engaged beyond this conference. Let's commit to working together and pulling in the same direction. This is about results for kids. It's about their future.

Will you join me? We can do this!

Let's engage and move forward together.

Thank you.