

A 'Tremendous Teacher Shortage' in Okla. Confronts First-Year Chief

By Lauren Camera on September 10, 2015 9:55 AM

How bad is the teacher shortage in Oklahoma? Well, it doesn't get much worse.

Last month the state board of education [approved requests for 503 emergency teacher certifications](#) on top of the Sooner State's 1,000-person teacher shortage.

To put that in perspective, in the 2011 school year, the state issued less than 40 emergency certifications, which district officials apply for when they've exhausted all options in trying to find a teacher with the necessary credentials and there isn't enough time before the start of the school year to test an individual who has agreed to fill in as a teacher.

"We have a tremendous teacher shortage," said state commission Joy Hofmeister, who sat down with *Education Week* Wednesday to chat about the [first few months of her administration](#). "You can have the highest standards in the world, but if you don't have the teachers to teach them, what good are they?"

While there's not one silver bullet for bucking the downward trend, Hofmeister said, a big part of eliminating the teacher shortage is to offer a more competitive compensation package. Why would educators stay in Oklahoma where starting teacher salaries average about \$32,000, she noted, when they could drive 20 minutes across the border to Texas and make more than \$50,000 in their first year?

Only Mississippi and South Dakota rank lower than Oklahoma when it comes to teacher pay.

"Laws of economics apply here," Hofmeister said. "I have a background in business so I understand that. We have to be competitive if we want to have top talent in our state. And that's what it's going to require."

To that end, she's calling for a \$5,000 increase in base pay for teacher salaries over the next five years.

"It's certainly not something that can be solved in one year," she said. "It takes a phase-in approach. What we're calling for is a five-year phase-in to become more regionally competitive. Then we can talk about competitive strategies for securing top talent, but we must build and deepen our pool of professional educators who are willing to stay in Oklahoma."

We chatted about other things as well, including the state's process of creating new content standards, its accountability system, testing, and more.

Here's an edited version of our interview:

What about the Common Core State Standards? [Oklahoma is in the process of designing new standards to replace the common core.]

We began that process in earnest this past March and April with the writing teams being assembled. I was very pleased with the effort and quality and caliber of those who had come together voluntarily and giving up their time and service to the state. That has been up for public view and we have sought the input of experts in the state in the subject matter. ... We also put that in a format where we could collect feedback from stakeholder through a survey. Most of the comments have been fairly positive. There are some technical areas of adjustment that were fairly minor. But it was the goal of the committee to make certain that we were competitive and that our students would have standards that aligned all the way from pre-K through 12th grade. We certainly looked to other states for inspiration—those that are top-performing states—and brought some of those authors in to make a presentation about their process and some of the outcomes so that we were able to take our next steps with confidence that they would produce the goal we want. I'm optimistic that we will meet our timeline. Right now that timeline is December. We need to have this approved by the state board of education so that they can give it to the legislature when they begin their session Feb. 2.

What about accountability?

When I took office, a lot of education reform initiatives had been passed very quickly without effective implementation. We are focusing on our A through F grading system ... We need to get it right. I believe in accountability. I don't know a school district or teacher who doesn't, but it has to be something that folks can count on, that is accurate and reliable. Often time I say about our A through F grading system ... that it should be a mirror that reflects accurate information. Instead we have more of a carnival funhouse mirror that's wavy. You can look in it and recognize yourself, but it's distorted and it shifts as you shift a little. And we know schools are ever-changing. It's increasingly more complex with the students that are attending, with socioeconomic circumstances that change. So we have to be flexible and able to address the needs of students and not have it so prescribed that we strap the hands of those we serve.

What about testing?

Testing is another big issue in Oklahoma. I'm interested in making certain we are spending our hard-earned tax payer dollars that have been entrusted to us in the most valuable way for students and I don't think we're doing that right now. So I will come back with an effort to reduce unnecessary testing, especially that which is not mandated federally.

What about the newly-released statewide test scores? [District-level data is still forthcoming.]

I think we will find much more information once we're able to disaggregate data. ... I think there was some skepticism that there would be a decline in reading scores [because of the implementation of the Reading Sufficiency Act] ... but what we saw was an increase in third grade and also a significant increase in fourth grade. That shows that the results and effort that we were realizing in third grade have sustained into the next grade. That's really promising.

I think there were other pieces in there that caused concern at first glance, eighth grade mathematics in particular. As we really painted the full picture you have to recognize that we had a **waiver to not double test students in middle school**. So we removed our most advanced and high-performing math students. We had more than 10,500 students who took more advanced course work and were not part of that [tested] group. We also had other students who [took other tests] that exempted them from taking the exam. ... So overall the bigger picture is, if it was steady in eighth grade ... it's actually a good sign in light of the fact that more and more students are taking advanced coursework or are exempt from [the test]. Overall we've seen some gains.

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