

Texas an education model for Oklahoma on more than teacher pay

June 10, 2018

Public school advocates often note that Texas pays teachers more than Oklahoma. Yet even as they argue for raising teacher pay to Texas levels, they seldom suggest Oklahoma's school finance system should be more like the Texas model.

Yet if Texas is the standard to beat, then Oklahoma officials needs to examine how Texas has managed to win this race for so long.

This isn't merely a question of taxation. While Texas has higher property taxes than Oklahoma, which fund schools, the state-local tax burden in Texas has been lower than in Oklahoma as a percentage of state income, according to the Tax Foundation. So Texas has done more on teacher pay with less overall taxation.

One problem in Oklahoma is that artificial restrictions prevent money from going to teacher pay even when overall funding increases. That problem isn't as apparent in Texas.

This is highlighted by Neal P. McCluskey, director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the libertarian Cato Institute. Using federal data, McCluskey examined total school spending in several state systems.

In Oklahoma, he found total per-pupil school spending increased 10 percent, even after adjusting for inflation, from the 1999-2000 school year to the 2014-2015 school year.

But during that time, inflation-adjusted per-pupil spending on instruction (teacher pay) “barely rose at all.” Instead, McCluskey wrote, “The biggest increase was in capital outlays, which spiked 79 percent ...” The next-largest increase was for other support services, which increased almost 48 percent.

Critics may counter that recent years have seen cuts in Oklahoma state school funding due to shortfalls caused by the Great Recession and low oil prices. But the data show an even more troubling pattern in Oklahoma in that period.

“After the recession, instructional spending dropped 13 percent, but capital outlays rose 36 percent, and a couple of support services saw upticks,” McCluskey wrote.

So how does that compare with Texas? We asked McCluskey, who reported that between the 1999-00 and 2014-15 school years, inflation-adjusted per-pupil instructional spending in Texas

dropped by about 4 percent. But spending on capital outlays fell roughly 23 percent. Total inflation-adjusted per-pupil spending declined slightly.

Put simply, Oklahoma tends to prioritize buildings over teachers when it comes to education spending, while Texas does the opposite. Texas teacher pay has outpaced Oklahoma's even in a period of increased school funding in Oklahoma and slight funding decline in Texas.

While local superintendents and school boards have played a large role in Oklahoma's low teacher pay, structural flaws in the finance system are a significant factor and need to be addressed.

Some candidates for governor have argued for reforming Oklahoma's school-funding formula or mandating that a larger share of spending be earmarked for classroom instruction. Both are worthy ideas, as is a constitutional amendment Oklahomans will soon consider to allow school-district voters to designate that some local property tax revenue go to teacher pay instead of being “walled off” only for building expenditures.

If Oklahoma is to compete with Texas in education, Oklahoma's system must change so that new football press boxes are not prioritized over increasing teacher pay.