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DR. EBONY JOHNSON, Tulsa Public Schools interim superintendent. ILLUSTRATION FACEBOOK AND THE OKLAHOMA EAGLE

A Vision Of Hope & Action

DR. EBONY JOHNSON *from A1*

TULSA PUBLIC SCHOOLS interim superintendent Dr. Ebony Johnson is a leader on an urgent mission to restore and revive Tulsa schools.

In a series of recent public forums, the direct spoken educational leader barred no holds in pinpointing the dilemmas facing Tulsa schools, including the learning gaps among students, severe teacher shortages, and the communication issues between the families of students and educators. She also detailed her plans for addressing each of these and other problems.

During a town hall a couple of weeks ago at the North Star Academy, 525 E. 46th St. N., attended mainly by north Tulsa parents and educators, Johnson shared with the audience stories of her roots as a student in northside schools and her early positions as a principal at McLain and Central high schools. She said these experiences have informed and given meaning to her mission to put TPS on a sound course.

Dr. Jennettie Marshall, who represents District 3 on the school board, moderated the meeting. In introducing Johnson, Marshall praised the interim administrator’s bold launch into her job.

A leader with a purpose

During the two-hour town hall, Johnson presented herself as a commanding supervisor with a unique approach and perspective that was shaped by her background growing up in north Tulsa and the knowledge she has garnered in an extensive career as a TPS employee and administrator. Johnson is only the fourth African American to serve as superintendent of TPS.

On the one hand, Johnson is an analytical professional who looks to data about which educational programs have worked and which have not been successful to better inform her in making a blueprint for improvements throughout Tulsa schools. On the other hand, she is a down-to-earth parent of two, including a daughter who is a junior at Booker T. Washington High School. Her role as a parent and engaged member of the north Tulsa community gives her a keen understanding of the day-to-day struggles students and parents in Tulsa face in getting their kids through the rigors of schooling.

Above all, Johnson made clear that the learning woes at TPS are dire and that a mood of emergency prevails in addressing the problems.

“I am going to be the leader who brings back the urgency around where our students are and where we need to get them,” she told the town hall audience. “How are we going to get them there? That’s our daily conversation. And it’s urgent and strategic.”

At the regular meeting with the Oklahoma State Board of Education on Oct. 26, Johnson updated members on the progress TPS has made in its

student literary program and in redressing other issues raised by the board earlier this year when it gave TPS its accreditation.

In these and other public presentations, Johnson followed through on a pledge she made when she was appointed interim TPS administrator in mid-September that she would reach out to various constituencies and be accessible to the community.

“My vision is to utilize my position to ensure that every child in this district knows that we are serious about their learning,” she told the town hall at North Star Academy. “We are serious about them making it and being successful. We are serious about them having a pathway and a plan after graduation. And all the team members around me feel the same level of conviction and urgency around all the students we serve.”

Johnson clarified that Black and Latinx students, who comprise the majority of TPS pupils, need particular attention.

“Since the statistics show that our Black and Brown students are the most challenged, that has to be called out,” she said. “Those students need to be a key area of our focus.”

In the North Star Academy gathering, Johnson also addressed several pointed questions from the audience, including how her leadership differs from that of her predecessor, Dr. Deborah Gist, and how well she works with controversial State Superintendent of Public Instruction Ryan Walters.

In outlining her wide-ranging goals for TPS, Johnson made clear that her most vital objective is to enhance the literacy of all TPS students. She walked the audience through the program that she and other administrators created to improve the abilities of Tulsa public schools’ students to read and test.

“We’ve got quite a bit of a few students, a lot of our students that are considered below basic readers,” Johnson said.

“Below basic is not where we want our students to be and is unacceptable. We’ve got to move those students from below basic to basic and from basic to proficient.”

She added, “I’m not mad about being asked how we will get our students there. It’s our responsibility to do that. That’s why we’re in education.”

Support for teachers is vital

For Johnson, another key agenda item is backing teachers and administrators.

“We’re going to be pushing a lot of support for our teachers,” she said. “The teachers want to do their best but just need us to help them get

DR. EBONY JOHNSON *cont. A3*



DR. EBONY JOHNSON, Tulsa Public Schools interim superintendent. ILLUSTRATION FACEBOOK AND THE OKLAHOMA EAGLE

DR. EBONY JOHNSON from A2

there. We're also going to be pushing for more support for counselors."

Johnson added, "we're going to ensure that we're setting graduation goals so that we're moving in the right direction to up our graduation rate while also making sure the students understand how to read and comprehend.

Johnson acknowledged that some educators have questioned how her bid to support teachers will work. "They said, 'Can we ensure we have team members going into classrooms who do what you outlined? And that we don't have floods of people with checklists who are looking and then checking and saying, 'Okay, I saw that you may or may not be doing what you're supposed to be doing.' That's not helping the teacher at all.'"

Addressing the teachers' concerns, Johnson said, "We got to get in there, make sure that they know that we're coming with some resources, some support, some expertise in real-time is not going to be I'm not the right person. I'm going to get you connected to the right person. Here's our email. Please reach out."

Johnson further underlined that TPS is committed to attracting new teachers to work in Tulsa schools.

"As you all know, we have a serious teacher shortage," she said. "Our talent management department has redesigned themselves to do more to go out to colleges and universities and other places to recruit both traditional teachers, alternatively certified teachers and emergency teachers. Every avenue that we could use, we've been using.

But, she added, "There's more that can be done. There are strategies and plans to take our teachers' assistants on the pathway to becoming teachers. We also have a district strategic plan around recruiting more educators of color. It's one thing to have it in our plans. It's another thing to be very intentional about ensuring that we recruit those teachers and add staff members. And we've begun to do that.

There are just not as many as we would love to come to Tulsa to want to teach in Tulsa public schools."

How Johnson differs from Gist

In the question-and-answer period of the town hall, one audience member asked Johnson how her course of leadership is different from that of Dr. Gist, her predecessor.

"I'm appreciative that Dr. Gist thought enough of me to position me in a role where I can make a significant difference with our young people," she said.

"The most significant difference between now and then is that I've continuously operated with urgency. I lose sleep when I

Tulsa Public Schools

Tulsa Public Schools is an independent school district serving the Tulsa, Oklahoma area in Northeastern Oklahoma. As of 2022, it is the largest school district in Oklahoma, surpassing Oklahoma City Public Schools for the first time since 2013. As of 2022 the district serves approximately 33,211 students.

Mission

Our students lead through literacy, are empowered through experience, and contribute to their community.

Vision

Tulsa Public Schools honors the diversity, creativity, and passion of our students, elevating every student to be designers of their destiny.

don't think we're doing well. When I get the data back, that doesn't look favorable. I get emotional. I feel like our young people come to us with an expectation that we will give them everything we have. And if I played a role in them not getting that, that's a problem for me. Suppose the state Department of Education is saying that the expectation is that we have to prepare to meet the Oklahoma academic standards. In that case, I am responsible for ensuring that everything we're doing is geared towards meeting that goal."

Another audience member asked how well Johnson works with State Superintendent of Public Instruction Walters, who voiced sharp criticism of the previous management of TPS.

"Superintendent Walters has a consistent level of understanding that the students have to succeed. And I have joy behind that. Everything else is a variable. I don't know what's coming next. All I do know is I must remain constant in following through on all the things that I talked about. I have a responsibility to stand in that truth. I hope that when I do visit with Superintendent Walters, he hears it and understands where my constant is. He understands that I know the charge and the responsibility that's before me for our young people. The relationship that I have as superintendent with Walters is just fine and cordial."

Parents should get more involved

Johnson devoted part of her meeting to encouraging parents to participate in the solutions for their kids' education.

"Let's put our cell phones down and have conversations with our kids," she said. "That's the way you can help them read. Put screen time down and turn the music off. And listen to them read. You read to them, and they read to you. You walk them through every letter, every sound, every word. That's what I did with my children. You can do many different things to help

your children have word recognition and sound recognition and support them and all those things."

Still, Johnson acknowledged that teachers and school administrators must find better ways to interact with families of TPS students.

"When our families come to us, and they don't always come in the way in which we would love for them to show up. Sometimes, they're upset, frustrated, or tired because they work a few jobs. Or they've taken on extra responsibilities to help other family members. Sometimes they're struggling to get through daily," she said. "It is our responsibility to welcome them with open arms."

Johnson also called on church leaders to be engaged in the mission to keep TPS on the right course.

"I'm just gonna put it on record. I'm a woman of prayer. So start off with that. Using the platform of the church is going to be critically important. Our families attend, and they can hear the messages of education. Church leaders should use the platform and the relationship that you have with our families in order to get them to understand the seriousness of their child's education. If you're up and you're preaching a sermon, and then it's time to do the announcement, maybe one of the announcements can center around when your child was in school and what they faced."

Progress report to the state board

Johnson also gave a progress report on student literacy in Tulsa schools at the Oklahoma State Board of Education (OSBE)'s Oct. 26 board meeting. It was the second monthly progress report to the board following the renewal of Tulsa Public Schools (TPS) accreditation in August.

The OSBE requires monthly in-person reports by the school district superintendent demonstrating efforts to improve student reading proficiency, upgrade the

performance of "failing" schools, and correct accounting processes that led to an embezzlement of school funds identified in 2022. The TPS board must progress in these areas as a condition of continuing Tulsa schools' accreditation.

Johnson's report focused on implementing teacher training and student intervention programs to improve childhood literacy. Along with three TPS staff members, Johnson spent most of an hour briefing the state board on district efforts to "ramp up the science of reading implementation."

The superintendent told the state board the district staff pours over reading data daily, "and in my case, every night." "The goal is to increase the number of proficient readers."

Johnson and the school staff made a detailed presentation on how the district accomplishes that goal. Programs included training elementary teachers in the science of reading, enhanced monitoring of teacher efforts in the classroom setting, and student intervention programs to provide personalized tutoring when pupil shortcomings are identified.

Johnson told the board that she and school staff meet regularly with the State Education Department professional personnel to implement their recommendations. Additionally, teachers and school staff emphasize community engagement in "working with families, informing them of student growth goals, and addressing chronic absenteeism."

The superintendent closed her remarks by telling the state board there was "still a tremendous amount of work to do." Future updates would address other board concerns in greater detail, she added.

For much of the meeting, state board members smiled and nodded in apparent approval of the district's plans and efforts. Following the presentation, board member Kendra Wesson addressed Johnson directly.

"Thank you for that and everything you are doing. I can see the heart and the effort you're putting into this, and it's beautiful to see. We're, like I told you, you are going to be Oklahoma's next success story. I know it."

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Walters also lavished praise. But he was at times reserved and at other times threatening in his remarks.

"While this is very good data, we want bigger" and a "much more aggressive number of students that are reading," he said. "Whatever we've got to do personnel-wise... site-wise... resource-wise, all options are on the table. We need to see real results."

Directing his remarks to Johnson, Walters warned, "[you] are not testing me, the district is not testing me...nothing is off limits...if that's not where we are headed, we will intervene."

James Edward Stewart: Civil Rights Advocate

By HANNAH D. ATKINS , THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF OKLAHOMA HISTORY AND CULTURE



A leader in the Oklahoma City, state, and national Civil Rights movement, James Edward Stewart worked very closely with Roscoe Dunjee, editor and publisher of the Black Dispatch, a weekly Oklahoma City newspaper. The son of Zena Thomas Stewart and Mary Magdeline Fegalee Stewart, James Edward was born on September 6, 1912, in Plano, Texas. He had one half-brother, Alfred, and two half-sisters, Ella and Johnnie. The family moved to Oklahoma in 1916. Stewart’s father died in 1920, leaving James to assist in supporting the family. Stewart attended Orchard Park Elementary School and later Douglass High School. There he and noted author Ralph Ellison both played in the band and became close friends. In 1928 Jimmy Stewart and his mother moved to Wichita, Kansas. He enrolled in the tenth grade at Wichita High School East, and he transferred the next year to Wichita High School North. In September 1931 he entered the Oklahoma Colored Agricultural and Normal University (now Langston University). After attending only one year, he moved to Oklahoma City. Stewart married Mae Belle Hayes in 1932 and parented a son. The couple were divorced in 1934. Stewart later married Mae Lois Layne on May 12, 1942, and to

this union were born two children. In Oklahoma City Stewart found work at various hotels and clubs as waiter and custodian. After connecting with publisher Roscoe Dunjee, he began writing a weekly column, “Jimmy Says,” for the Black Dispatch. Because he was acquainted with a top official at Oklahoma Natural Gas Company, Stewart gained employment as a janitor in June 1937; in September 1940 he was named manager of the company’s eastside office Northeast Fourth Street. During World War II he volunteered for the U.S. Marines in 1943 and was assigned to the Fifty-first Defense Battalion. He achieved the rank of steward first class and was discharged honorably in December 1945. In 1976 he was appointed vice president of Oklahoma Natural Gas Company, and he served in that capacity until his retirement in September 1977. Very active in the Civil Rights movement, Stewart served as president of the Oklahoma City branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), as well as of the state chapter. He served on the NAACP national board for eight three-year terms. Through his work with Dunjee and the Black Dispatch, his outreach extended across the state and nation. In July 1982 Stewart was elected chairman of

the Oklahoma City Urban Renewal Authority. In 1984 Gov. George Nigh appointed him to the State Narcotics and Controlled Drug Commission. He was president of Oklahomans for Progress, which was dedicated to the elimination of inequities based on race. Jimmy Stewart’s record of public service brought him many awards. In 1975 he received the Service to Mankind award from the Sertoma Club of Oklahoma City and in 1976 accepted the Golden Plate award from the NAACP. In 1980 a section of Northeast Fourth Street was named James E. Stewart Industrial Park. He was inducted into the Afro-American Hall of Fame by the Ntu Art Association (located at the Kirkpatrick Center in Oklahoma City) and in 1986 into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame. In 1994 Stewart was given the Pathmaker Award by the Oklahoma County Historical Society. The Oklahoma Parks and Recreation Department named a golf course for him at Northeast Tenth Street and Martin Luther King, Jr., Avenue. In 1997 he was inducted into the Oklahoma Journalism Hall of Fame. A loyal and active member of the Episcopal Church of the Redeemer, James E. Stewart died on April 13, 1997, and was buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

JIMMY STEWART and Herbert Ellison. (23157.104, Jimmy Stewart Collection, OHS).

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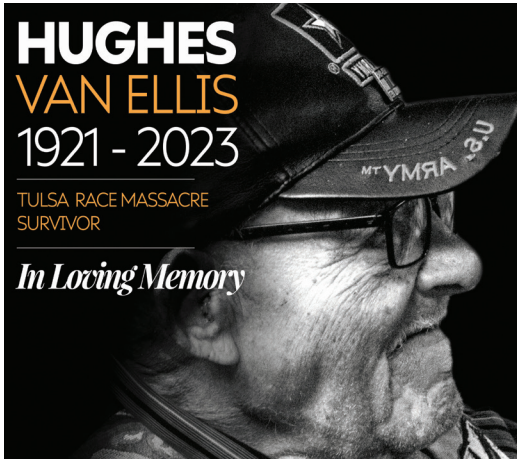
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Featured Last Week



Hughes Van Ellis: Survivor, Community Advocate, Optimist

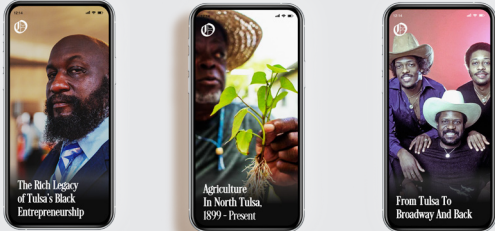


Kuma Roberts: Taking The BWS Chamber To A New Level



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TODD RUSS, Oklahoma Treasurer, at podium, discusses implementation of the Oklahoma Energy Discrimination Elimination Act during a Senate interim study at the Capitol on Wednesday, Oct. 11, 2023, in Oklahoma City.
PHOTO PAUL MONIES/OKLAHOMA WATCH

A bill not clear enough to be defensible

ENERGY BOYCOTT LAW *from A1*

OKLAHOMA House Speaker Charles McCall is replacing two of his appointees to a state pension system. The move follows a board vote in August to use an exemption from a new state law forbidding the state from doing business with financial firms perceived to be hostile to the oil and gas industry.

The board replacements came as the state Senate held an interim study Wednesday morning over the implementation of the Oklahoma Energy Discrimination Elimination Act. The law, passed as House Bill 2034 in 2022, has caused confusion for cities and counties and sown disagreement between Treasurer Todd Russ and some board members and staff for the state’s pension systems.

McCall decided not to keep Quyen Do and Tracey Ritz as his appointees on the board for the Oklahoma Public Employees Retirement System. Their four-year terms expired in January, although they had been serving on an interim basis for six meetings this year.

The OPERS board voted 9-1 in August to exercise a financial responsibility exemption to the law so it wouldn’t have to divest \$6 billion in pension assets managed by BlackRock Inc. That firm and five others are on the latest version of the restricted companies list put out by Russ’ office. Staff for the pension system said it could cost an estimated \$10 million to divest holdings from BlackRock.

Do, who works for the House, referred questions to the speaker’s office. Ritz said Wednesday afternoon she had not yet heard from House staff about not being reappointed. The Oklahoma Public Employees Association recommended her to the speaker for the board appointment in 2019.

“I took my position on that board very seriously,” Ritz said of her vote to take the exemption. “I just looked at all the information the (OPERS) staff had given us as well as the costs involved in changing the portfolio. My fiduciary responsibilities led me to that conclusion. I voted my own conscience as I felt what was needed to protect my own retirement system. If we’re going to have to take a lot of money out

The OPERS board voted 9-1 in August to exercise a financial responsibility exemption to the law so it wouldn’t have to divest \$6 billion in pension assets managed by BlackRock Inc.

because we have to change things on the portfolio, that’s a hit to my pocket as well as every other state employee out there.”

McCall spokesman Daniel Seitz said the speaker did not have any conversations with Do and Ritz about the OPERS board vote to take the exemption. He had no timeline on naming replacements to the board. The next OPERS board meeting is scheduled for Oct. 19.

“We routinely replace expired positions, especially where many people could serve, so as to give more citizens the opportunity to participate,” Seitz said in a statement.

Russ chairs the Oklahoma State Pension Commission that oversees policies for all the state’s pension systems. At his urging, the commission sent a letter to OPERS last month outlining opposition to the exemption vote. Russ, who also serves on the OPERS board, was the lone no vote at the board’s exemption vote in August.

In his letter, Russ said OPERS’ request for proposals for new fund managers came in a compressed time frame and its analysis of the bids and an analysis by an independent consultant favored the status quo. He also said the exemption taken was so broad it effectively negates the law.

“The board should immediately begin a new RFP process that addresses the issues raised above, and after reviewing those bids, hold another hearing at which the board can make a decision that complies with the EDEA and its fiduciary duties,” Russ said in the letter.

Senators suggest changes

The energy discrimination law may be tweaked in the upcoming regular session that begins in February, several senators said during Wednesday’s interim study.

“There is confusion in this bill,” said Sen. Dave Rader, R-Tulsa. “We have good people disagreeing. We have people trying to do their jobs. We have pension managers and their boards not agreeing with the treasurer.”

Sen. Kristen Thompson, R-Edmond, said it appears the law gives the treasurer a lot of leeway in determining how financial firms are discriminating against the oil and gas industry. She asked how companies can get off the list.

“It seems like this could be very, very subjective,” Thompson said.

Russ said his office used advice from other states to develop a questionnaire to financial companies doing business with the state. The first version of the restricted list incorrectly included several private companies because they failed to respond to the questionnaire. Russ said the list included companies with fossil fuel investments that had also signed on to climate-related pledges for their investments.

“While they still held hundreds of millions or billions, it was clear they were walking away from that (oil and gas) industry,” Russ said. “It was the trend that was my concern.”

Russ told senators the law needs to be clarified on how exemptions can be taken and if divestment costs can be traced to the value of the underlying assets rather than the typical transaction costs in administration of pension assets.

“If the bill is important to the state of Oklahoma, it’s got to be clear enough that it’s defensible, otherwise we won’t change one penny of our financial position in the state as it relates to the pensions themselves,” Russ said.

Apart from OPERS, the Oklahoma Firefighters Pension and Retirement Board may have to find a new custodian bank for its \$3.5 billion system as State Street remains on the treasurer’s restricted company list. Custodian banks provide a wide range of services for pension systems, including moving money around from a system’s various investments and portfolios. State Street has been the system’s custodian banker for more than 40 years.

Russ said he understood some of the pushback from state pension systems over the law.

“It’s disruptive,” Russ said. “It’s uncomfortable. You’ve got years of relationships with investment advisors. Hopefully we can walk through this together and make that a successful transition.”

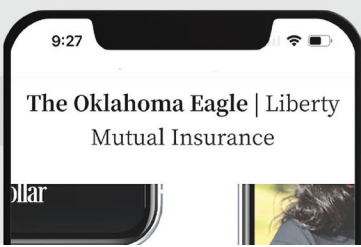
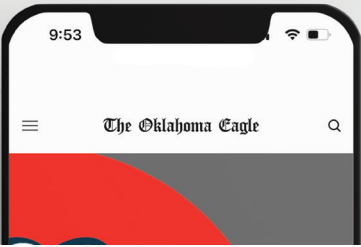
Corporation Commissioner Kim David, who sponsored the bill as a senator before winning a seat in November on the Corporation Commission, said she talks frequently with large investment firms in her role as a utility regulator. David said the law is helping change the conversation over some of those companies’ environmental, social and governance policies.

ENERGY BOYCOTT LAW *cont. A6*

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Our Mission

To amplify our core value of equity, through journalism and editorial” is the cornerstone of our continued success.



The energy discrimination law may be tweaked in the upcoming regular session that begins in February

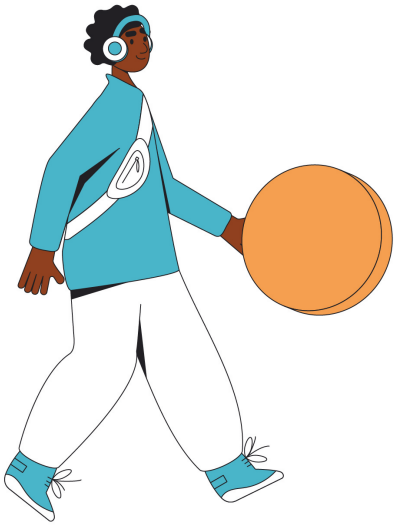


PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

ENERGY BOYCOTT LAW from A5

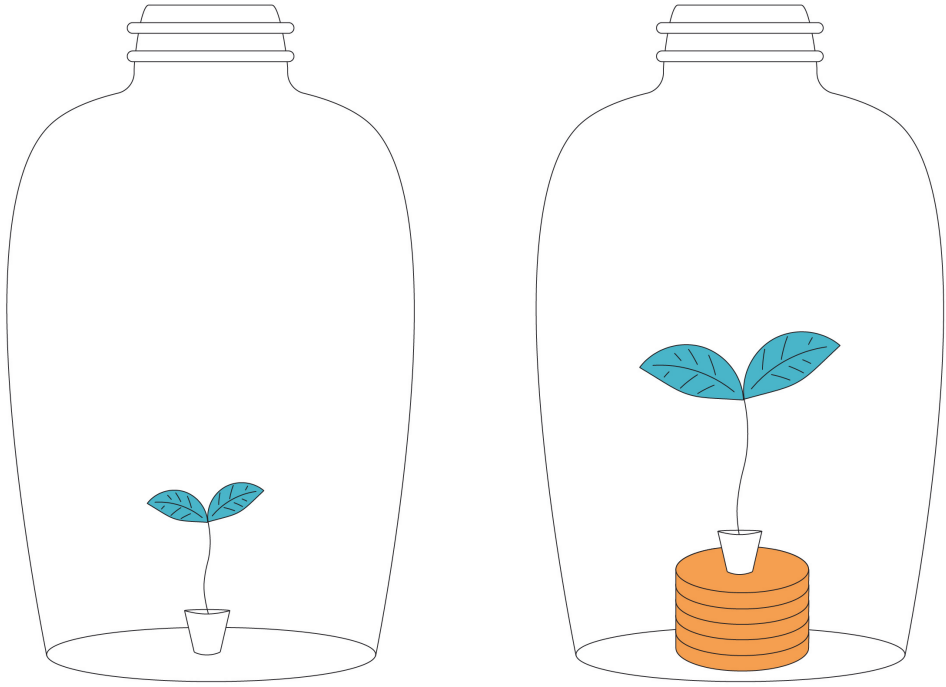
“It is having an effect,” David said. “It’s having a positive effect for Oklahoma. Not on a wide scale with your big investment companies that are worldwide; they are still insisting they are not going to invest in oil and gas. But it is with the banking community as a whole. You’re starting to see some changes.”

David said the law included ways for Oklahoma cities, counties and state pension systems to take exemptions if they could show proof that divesting or canceling contracts would damage their financial positions.

“We did not want to do any damage to the political subdivisions or our retirement systems,” David said of the legislative intent behind the law.

Russ agreed with several senators that any updates to the law should take out the provision that applies to cities and counties that have contracts in excess of \$100,000 with banks on the restricted list. The city of Stillwater put a project on hold after Bank of America was placed on the list.

A Kansas-based nonprofit, the State Financial Officers Foundation, has been providing Russ and other Republican state treasurers and financial officials with talking points and opinion columns targeting what they perceive to be out-of-control climate policies approved by shareholders of publicly traded banks and financial companies.



If the bill is important to the state of Oklahoma, it’s got to be clear enough that it’s defensible, otherwise we won’t change one penny of our financial position in the state as it relates to the pensions themselves.

TODD RUSS Oklahoma state treasurer
and chair of the Oklahoma State Pension Commission

The State Financial Officers Foundation does not list its donors or sponsors, but according to the emails obtained by Oklahoma Watch, much of its media outreach includes Fox News, Newsmax and other conservative-leaning outlets like The Daily Signal, Briartbart and the Free Beacon.

PAUL MONIES has been a reporter with Oklahoma Watch since 2017 and covers state agencies and public health. Contact him at (571) 319-3289 or pmonies@oklahomawatch.org. Follow him on Twitter @pmonies.

AN OKLAHOMA MAN USED PANDEMIC RELIEF FUNDS TO HAVE HIS NAME CLEARED OF MURDER



PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

By PAUL MONIES, OKLAHOMA WATCH
CLEARED OF MURDER from A1

GREENWOOD, Ark. (AP) — Ricky Dority spends most of his days playing with his grandchildren, feeding chickens and working in the yard where he lives with his son’s family.

It’s a jarring change from where he was just several months ago, locked in a cell serving a life prison sentence at Oklahoma’s Joseph Harp Correctional Center in a killing he said he didn’t commit. After more than two decades behind bars, Dority had no chance at being released — until he used his pandemic relief funds to hire a dogged private investigator.

The investigator and students at the Oklahoma Innocence Project at Oklahoma City University, which is dedicated to exonerating wrongful convictions in the state, found inconsistencies in the state’s account of a 1997 cold-case killing, and Dority’s conviction was vacated in June by a Sequoyah County judge.

Now, the 65-year-old says he’s enjoying the 5-acre property in a quiet neighborhood of well-to-do homes in the rolling, forested hills of the Arkansas River Valley outside of Fort Smith. “If you’re gone for a lot of years, you don’t take it for granted anymore.”

Dority is one of nearly 3,400 people who have been exonerated across the country since 1989, mostly over murder convictions, according to the National Registry of Exonerations. In Oklahoma, there have been more than 43 exonerations in that time, not including three new exonerations this year.

The cases underscore a serious problem facing a judicial system in which many old convictions resulted from overworked defense attorneys, shoddy forensic work, overzealous prosecutors and outdated investigative techniques.

The problem is particularly acute given Oklahoma’s history of sending people to death row, where 11 inmates have been exonerated since 1981. The issue has pushed a Republican-led legislative panel to consider whether a death penalty moratorium should be imposed.

In Oklahoma County, Glynn Ray Simmons was freed after spending nearly 50 years in prison, including time on death row, in a 1974 killing after a judge determined prosecutors failed to turn over evidence in the case, including a police report that showed an eyewitness might have identified other suspects.

And just this week, Perry Lott, who served more than 30 years in prison, had his rape and burglary conviction vacated in Pontotoc County after new DNA testing excluded him as the perpetrator. Pontotoc County, in particular, has come under intense scrutiny for a series of wrongful convictions in the 1980s that have been the subject of numerous books, including John Grisham’s “The Innocent Man,” which he produced into a six-part documentary on Netflix.

The most common causes of wrongful convictions are eyewitness misidentification, misapplication of forensic science, false confessions, coerced pleas and official misconduct, generally by police or prosecutors, according to the Innocence Project, a national organization based in New York.

In Dority’s case, he said he was railroaded by an overzealous sheriff and a state prosecutor eager to solve the killing of 28-year-old Mitchell Nixon,

CLEARED OF MURDER cont. A7

EDUCATION WATCH: Oklahoma Board Approves Religious Charter School Contract

By JENNIFER PALMER, OKLAHOMA WATCH

CHARTER SCHOOL CONTRACT from A1

By a split vote on Monday, the state’s online charter authorizer narrowly approved a contract with Catholic leaders to operate the nation’s first religious charter school, St. Isidore of Seville. State law prohibits publicly-funded schools from being affiliated with a particular religious sect, but this contract carves out protections for a religious nonprofit organization, stating “it has the right to freely exercise its religious beliefs and practices consistent with its Religious Protections.”

There is a provision to prohibit the school from discriminating against students in enrollment, stating that the school can’t deny admission to any student on the basis of “race, color, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, disability, age, proficiency in the English language, religious preference or lack thereof, income,

aptitude, or academic ability.”

The Statewide Virtual Charter School Board voted 3-2 to approve the contract. Scott Strawn, Brian Bobek and Nellie Tayloe Sanders voted yes; Chairman Robert Franklin and William Pearson voted no. Each member cast the same vote in June to approve the school’s application.

Franklin explained his vote: “They can, without our purview, manage a school, do a school, design a school, practice their faith, do it in amazing fidelity. But if you’re asking to have the state taxpayer dollars, then some other entity’s got to make that decision, because it doesn’t align.”

If the school leaders sign the contract, the school could begin preparing to operate as a state-funded charter school, unless a court intervenes.



PHOTO OKLAHOMA WATCH

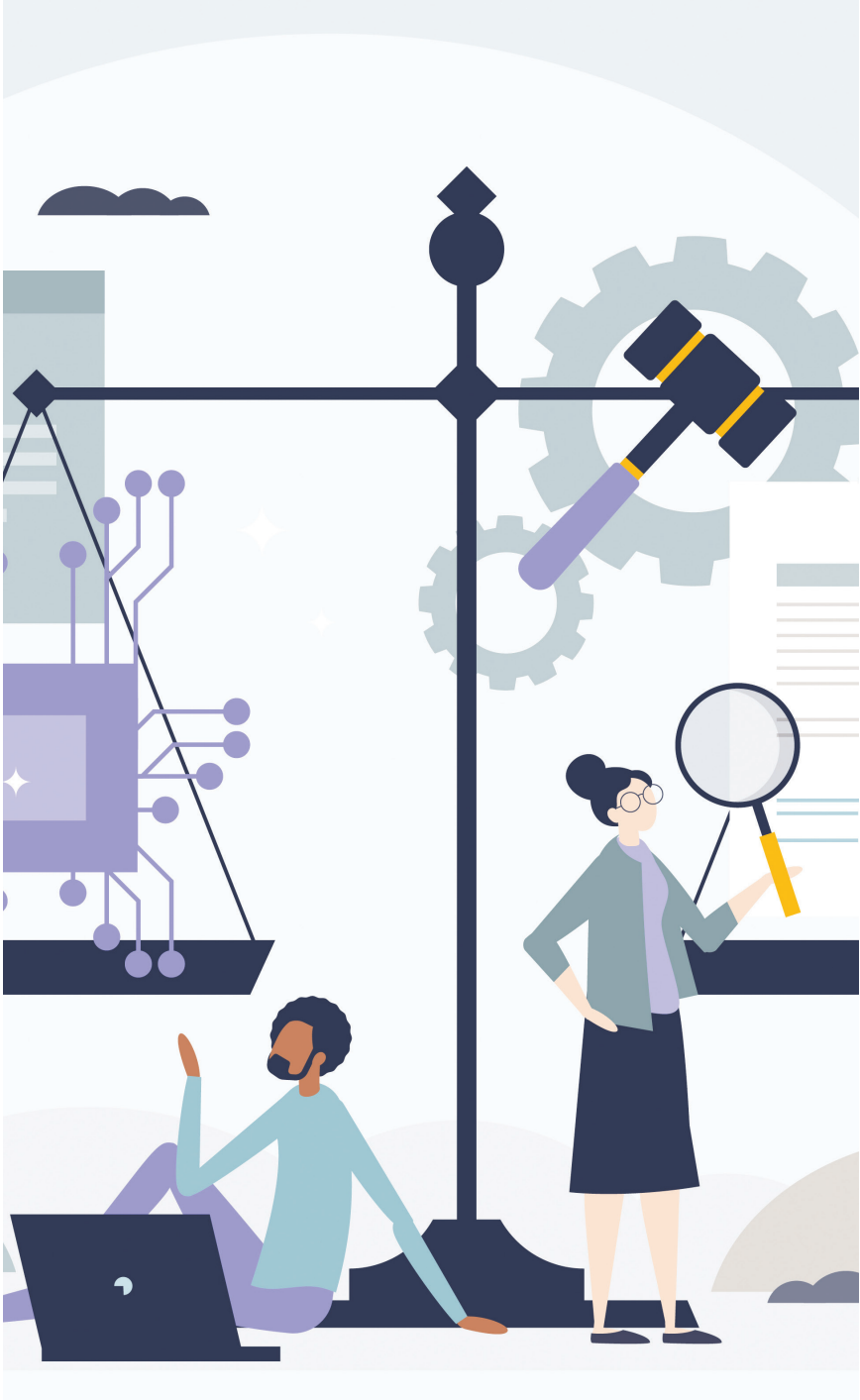


ILLUSTRATION ADOBE IMAGES

DORITY EVENTUALLY TURNED TO THE UNIVERSITY'S OKLAHOMA INNOCENCE PROJECT

CLEARED OF MURDER from A6

who was found beaten to death in 1997. Investigators who reopened the case in 2014 coerced a confession from another man, Rex Robbins, according to Andrea Miller, the legal director of the Oklahoma Innocence Project. Robbins, who would plead guilty to manslaughter in Nixon's killing, implicated Dority, who at the time was in a federal prison on a firearms conviction. Dority said he knew he didn't have anything to do with the crime and found paperwork that proved he had been arrested on the day of the killing. "I thought I was clear because I knew I didn't have anything to do with that murder," Dority said. "But they tried me for it and found me guilty of it." Jurors heard about Robbins' confession and testimony from a police informant who said Dority had changed bloody clothes at his house the night of the killing. They convicted him of first-degree murder and recommended a sentence of life without parole. After years in prison, while most inmates spent their federal COVID-19 relief check in the commissary, Dority used his to hire a private investigator, he said. Bobby Staton had mostly investigated insurance fraud, but he took on the case and realized quickly that it was riddled with holes, Staton said. He eventually turned to the university's Oklahoma Innocence Project, which assigned a law student, Abby Brawner, to help investigate. Their investigation turned when Staton and Brawner visited Robbins in the maximum-security Oklahoma State Reformatory in Granite, and he recanted his statement implicating Dority. "It was pretty intimidating," Brawner said. "Especially when you're going in to meet someone who doesn't know you're coming and doesn't want to talk to you." Brawner and Staton also learned the informant didn't live at the home where he told investigators Dority showed up in bloody clothes. When the actual homeowner testified at a hearing this summer, the judge dismissed the case. Dority's original attorneys were ineffective for not discovering the informant didn't live at the home, the judge said, giving prosecutors 90 days to decide whether they will retry him. That three months has been extended, and prosecutors have said they intend to ask the judge for more time for DNA testing. Dority, confident in his innocence, said he's not concerned about additional forensic testing. Sequoyah County District Attorney

He is one of nearly 3,400 people who have been exonerated across the country since 1989.

Jack Thorp and former Sheriff Ron Lockhart did not respond to requests for comment from The Associated Press. But Assistant District Attorney James Dunn, who is overseeing the case and was not in the office when it was originally prosecuted, said he agreed with the judge's dismissal after hearing the homeowner's testimony and learning a witness "was not credible." "The last thing I want to see is an innocent person in prison for a crime they didn't commit," Dunn said. "Because that means the person who actually did commit the crime, or those persons, are still out there." Meanwhile, Dority is learning to use a smartphone and the television remote control, he said. He's thankful to Staton and the Innocence Project and says his case proves others are wrongfully imprisoned in Oklahoma. "After they've done what they've done to me, I know there are people in that prison who are innocent that need to be out and need help getting out," he said. "If they hadn't gotten me out, I'd have been in there for the rest of my life."

SEAN MURPHY is the statehouse reporter for The Associated Press in Oklahoma City. He has covered Oklahoma news and politics since 1996.



PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

Reading is foundational

SCIENCE OF READING from A1

When former public school teacher Lucia Frohling read her elementary-age daughter's journal one day after summer school, her heart broke. "I'm stupid," the young girl had written. "I'm an idiot, and I don't want to be on Earth." Going into fourth grade, Frohling's daughter was reading on a kindergarten level. Multiple efforts at intervention and extra help from teachers in Deer Creek Public Schools had failed, leaving her confidence "shattered." Frohling said she knew her daughter was smart, but every time she asked administrators in Deer Creek Public Schools to help in the way she knew was needed, she said she encountered resistance. After finally getting the district to accept that her daughter had dyslexia in addition to her dysgraphia, a type of writing disorder, Frohling asked Deer Creek to use the Take Flight intervention program, which is designed to teach students with reading and writing disabilities via practices developed from a body of research known as the "science of reading." While not a curriculum itself, the broad concepts under the science of reading umbrella use disciplines such as neuroscience and psychology to create an understanding of how kids learn to read and how brain processes allow it to happen. Typically, curricula using science-of-reading research emphasize more phonics instruction and sequential, explicit guidance on how to decode words and sentences. When Frohling and Deer Creek Public Schools could not reach an agreement on using the Take Flight intervention for Frohling's requested 45 minutes each day, Frohling moved her daughter to Trinity School at Edgemere, a private school for kids with learning disabilities whose teachers are trained in structured literacy, a curriculum similar to the Take Flight intervention program that also uses practices derived from the science of reading. Frohling's son, who also has dyslexia, was already enrolled at Trinity. "[She] now reads on a second-, third-grade level after one year. She no longer has suicidal ideation," Frohling said, adding that her daughter now wears her disabilities proudly.

'Reading is foundational'

Data and anecdotal stories indicate that Frohling's experience can be common. According to the 2022 Nation's Report Card, 45 percent of Oklahoma fourth graders tested below the basic reading level. Just 24 percent are at or above proficient. Nationally, 37 percent of fourth graders are below the "basic" benchmark in reading. For years, these numbers have been dismal at the state and national levels, and Oklahoma's scores have dropped over the past 25 years. In 1998, 34 percent of Oklahoma fourth graders were below the basic reading level. Nationally, 40 percent of fourth graders fell below that standard. The fourth-grade metric is important. Many reading experts emphasize the importance of ensuring kids know how to read by third grade, which is roughly when students transition from learning to read to reading to learn. Since he took office, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Ryan Walters has made improving Oklahoma's reading scores one of his core priorities, but his clashes with legislators and his focus on culture-war divides have left little air in the room for

breathing life into reading pedagogy. Nonetheless, the topic is one Walters wants to discuss, and he has worked to amplify the existing Science of Reading Academies program created in 2021 by his predecessor, Joy Hofmeister, as a way to address sagging reading scores during the pandemic. "Reading is foundational," Walters said. "I think we have to do this. I think for our kids to be successful, for us to win on education, for us to be a leader, for us to have the type of education systems our kids deserve (...) it has to start with reading and reading comprehension." Like many others in literacy curriculum circles across the country, Walters has hailed the science of reading as the solution to address low reading scores. He is not the first. The movement supporting the science of reading saw a push in the early 2000s before losing momentum, but recent national coverage has given it new life. While politicians like Walters use the term copiously and call for its widespread adoption in classrooms, others say it is simply too general to "adopt" as a silver bullet to fix reading scores. "When you talk about the science of reading, that's actually a very broad term that encompasses a lot of different research," said AJ Griffin, a former state senator and current CEO of the Potts Family Foundation, which prioritizes early childhood development as a focus area. "So, when the State Department (of Education) uses that term, I'm not 100 percent sure which body of research they're referring to." Despite disagreements over the definition of the science of reading, most literacy experts agree that something needs to change to improve reading scores, and most tend to agree that any change needs to incorporate evidence-based practices for literacy instruction. To that end, Walters requested \$100 million from the Oklahoma Legislature this spring to implement a science-of-reading-based program statewide, and he recently argued in favor of using science-of-reading practices when discussing Tulsa Public Schools' low reading scores. Although lawmakers eventually included \$10 million in their massive education package for a three-year pilot program of literacy specialists, Walters' \$100 million request was not granted by the Legislature. But Walters is already preparing to push the topic again next session and continue shifting the Oklahoma State Department of Education toward science-of-reading-based practices to teach literacy across the state. 'Feedback from teachers has been overwhelmingly positive' While the Reading Sufficiency Act has been in state statute since 1997, it has been amended several times since. Legislators and OSDE have also drafted new laws, rules and programs to help train teachers in practices derived from the science of reading. In 2021, OSDE created the Science of Reading Academies to give teachers training in an intensive program called Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS). As the state's superintendent of public instruction at the time, Hofmeister dedicated \$13 million of federal pandemic relief funding to the effort, which had a goal of training 10,000 elementary educators by 2024. Two years later, despite Walters often criticizing his predecessor, he has continued support for the program within OSDE.

SCIENCE OF READING cont. A8

When former public school teacher Lucia Frohling read her elementary-age daughter’s journal one day after summer school, her heart broke.

SCIENCE OF READING



PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

SCIENCE OF READING *from A7*

“Through [the Science of Reading Academies] we have offered an intensive professional development for teachers dealing specifically with grades K through three,” Melissa Ahlgrim, OSDE’s program director of early literacy policy programs, said in an interview this summer. Our feedback from teachers has been overwhelmingly positive.”

That positive feedback could be essential for continuing to implement science-of-reading practices. For some teachers who learned other methods or who relied on other popular approaches for years, it has been difficult to make the shift and accept that the way they taught reading for years could have been less effective, Ahlgrim said.

“Change is very scary, and it is very emotional,” said Ahlgrim, a former teacher. “When you’ve been doing something like teaching kids, and then somebody comes along and tells you what you’ve been doing — it’s not helping your kid — we as teachers take that very personally.”

To that end, officials with OSDE and other experts stress that poor reading scores are caused by a variety of factors.

“It’s not a teacher’s fault,” Walters said. “They went through a college of education or attended a training and were told the wrong thing. But now we’ve got to make sure we bring the proper attention to it and go, ‘Guys, hey, we’re here to help.’ And that’s what I want them to hear from the State Department.”

Complicating his message to teachers, however, has been Walters’ near-constant rhetoric that rubs some educators the wrong way. This year, Walters has called teacher unions a “terrorist organization” and has perpetuated what some have called a culture of fear in some school districts.

‘Admitting you’ve got a problem’

Many advocates for better literacy instruction, including Walters, argue that the cause of poor reading scores lies in a lack of evidence-based reading instruction in classrooms across the nation — in other words, a lack of practices derived from the science of reading.

One method of teaching reading that had been popular for decades came from Lucy Calkins, a Columbia Teachers College professor who traveled the country training educators in her curriculum, which districts across the country use either

ACCORDING TO THE
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OKLAHOMA FOURTH
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ARE AT OR ABOVE
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fully or in part. The program focused more on fostering a love of reading and writing in students instead of on giving students explicit instruction in decoding words. Recently, however, that approach has received scrutiny, and Calkins herself added more phonics to her method before the Teachers College dissolved her organization last month.

Calkins’ popularity grew from an area of need. Many teachers across the country who received little instruction in how to teach reading from their universities have been eager to implement methods taught to them by a prestigious Teachers College professor.

Frohling was one such teacher. In her first year in the classroom, her school brought in Calkins’ “writing workshop” to provide teachers a better way to instruct students. While she was excited to learn, Frohling said trying to implement the curriculum provided less effective than she had hoped.

“It wasn’t magical,” Frohling said, noting that her experience left her interested in other methods of teaching reading that her daughter would eventually use.

Walters has been quick to heap blame on colleges for not teaching better methods to future educators.

“We have to just address this as a problem that has occurred both because of higher ed and because of folks that don’t have this training and background. I haven’t met a single teacher that I’ve talked to who doesn’t want to be a great reading instructor,” Walters said. “The first part of fixing a problem is admitting you’ve got a problem.”

According to the National Council on Teacher Quality, none of Oklahoma’s 12 elementary education programs have an “A” grade for literacy instruction. Just three — the University of Oklahoma, Cameron University and Langston University — have “B” grades. Five programs have “F” grades.

The NCTQ review graded programs based on the number of scientifically based reading instruction components they cover. As programs include less science-based instruction or more instruction contrary to the science, their ranking is downgraded.

At OU, students in the Jeannine Rainbolt College of Education who study early childhood education take a class on language and literacy development. Jiening Ruan, a professor in the college’s instructional leadership and academic curriculum department,

said OU has become “more intentional in equipping our pre-service teachers with critical knowledge of reading research and research-based instructional practices and strategies.”

“In our courses, we emphasize the critical role that explicit and systematic instruction of phonemic awareness and phonics plays in beginning reading,” Ruan said in a statement emailed to NonDoc. “They also have opportunities to evaluate multiple state-adopted literacy curricula using their knowledge of research-based reading instruction and identify strengths and areas that may need supplementation. Our approaches to literacy instruction have always been informed by the latest research in reading and literacy.”

For years, many teachers across the country have relied on some variation of a curriculum known as “balanced literacy” to teach students to read. That curriculum incorporates a number of reading instruction practices teachers can use to teach students to read based on individual student needs. However, the approach has been criticized recently owing to its lack of emphasis on phonics and its supposed reliance on having students guess what word they’re reading.

Many districts in Oklahoma and across the country use Calkins’ method, balanced literacy or similar programs, either in their entirety or as aspects of instruction. Deer Creek, for instance, has a mixed program, even though its teachers are trained in Structured Literacy Basics.

Frohling, who no longer teaches, is now the director of parent services at Every Kid Counts Oklahoma, a controversial and reform-focused organization that was led by Walters until after he was elected state superintendent. Following questions about how Walters and EKCO handled federal COVID relief funding, the organization’s website displays an overhaul of staff and only two remaining board members.

Frohling said she uses her personal experience and expertise to help other parents of kids with disabilities as they navigate the complicated landscape of Individualized Education Plans in public schools.

She said that, although many students can learn to read with curricula such as balanced literacy and Calkins’ “writing workshop,” methods that do not incorporate and emphasize explicit and sequential instruction in decoding words will always

leave a significant percentage of students behind, particularly those with learning disabilities like dyslexia.

“If you teach all children the way dyslexics can be taught and should be taught and need to be taught, everyone can learn,” Frohling said. “But if you teach balanced literacy, and it’s not systematic and explicit, then you’re leaving out at least 20 percent of the population, if not more.”

‘Nothing more heartbreaking’

Tammy Dillard is the director of the teaching and learning team at the Oklahoma Public School Resource Center. She described five “big ideas” of literacy instruction:

- Phonological awareness,
- Phonics,
- Vocabulary,
- Fluency, and
- Comprehension.

Dillard said it is a misconception to think of those five ideas as sequential, meaning pre-K students begin with phonological awareness and third-grade students round out their literacy instruction with comprehension. Rather, good reading teachers should incorporate all five ideas throughout a student’s literacy education, she said.

“All five big ideas are in the car, and when the student is in pre-K, phonological awareness is the idea that’s driving, but the other big ideas are still in the car. You’re still reading aloud to that 4-year-old and developing comprehension skills, and you’re still working on nursery rhymes and developing some fluency,” Dillard said. “As the child grows, the driver changes, but all the big ideas are still in the car.”

She said understanding good literacy instruction is important, as many teachers and education experts take a step back to evaluate why reading scores have been so low for so long.

Walters stressed the need for real solutions as soon as possible. “There’s nothing more heartbreaking than when you deal with a high school kid who can’t read,” Walters said. “By that point, their confidence is so shot. (...) It’s heartbreaking.”

Even science-of-reading advocates have reacted with caution to OSDE’s new push for literacy reform. Dillard said that while teacher-training programs are important, they must be

SCIENCE OF READING *cont. A9*



PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

Feedback from teachers has been overwhelmingly positive

SCIENCE OF READING from A8

ongoing to be effective.

“If I’m a principal in Oklahoma today and I send my first-, second- and third-grade teams to go get this training in implementing the science of reading, and then they come back to school and there is no ongoing support, no instructional coaching, no real effort to make sure that it’s making it beyond the training window, then we really are not going to see the results that everybody really aspires to see,” Dillard said.

But some early childhood experts say that even if curricula involving science of reading practices are well-implemented, improving literacy can still be a challenge owing to factors outside the classroom.

“If we look at the gaps we have in achievement around reading among Oklahoma school kids, that gap is actually created before they ever arrive in school in communities that are under resourced,” said Griffin. “There’s a very clear link in the literature between what happens in the first five years of life — and even before they’re born — and how well they perform once they get to school.”

Griffin acknowledged the importance of the science of reading but said classroom practices can only go so far in addressing developmental gaps in children.

“Lack of socialization is part of it, and then isolation of families that don’t have access to the resources or the experience that really prepare kids for school,” Griffin said. “There’s a direct link between school performance and the vocabulary used in a home, access to books at a very young age, regular health care access.”

Earlier this year, Griffin became CEO of the Potts Family Foundation, a prominent philanthropic organization that focuses largely on child welfare. Promoting evidence-based literacy and numeracy is one of the foundation’s four focus areas in its OK25by25 campaign that aims

to improve Oklahoma’s childhood wellbeing rankings.

Griffin emphasized the need for families to address pre-literacy skills with their kids before they ever get to the classroom.

“If we don’t address the gaps in those milestones of learning before they get to school, the techniques to teach reading in school are really kind of irrelevant,” Griffin said.

\$100 million? Try \$10 million first

Legislative leaders would seem to agree with Walters’ goal of improving literacy for students via science-of-reading-based practices. As part of a massive education funding package, they appropriated \$10 million for a three-year pilot program for elementary school reading specialists, a fraction of the amount than Walters’ requested \$100 million for a broad program.

Outlined in SB 1118, the appropriation will establish a “literacy instructional team” consisting of 15 members trained in “the science of how students learn to read” who will be placed in regions across the state to assist districts with improving students’ literacy outcomes.

“We want to be able to set up sustainable systems that help schools know how to use their data, to identify student needs, and match that with the type of instruction that those students need to be successful,” Ahlgrim said. “While also doing that, (the team will be) setting up those processes so that schools who we’re not able to work with right now could still have step one, step two and step three for, ‘Here’s how you can go about setting this up in your schools as well.’”

Ahlgrim and Walters said the new law is important to help improve student literacy rates, and legislators who drafted the law requiring team members to be trained in the science of reading clearly agree.

But partly owing to his divisive style, Walters had little overall influence on the 2023 session’s education negotiations, according to House Appropriations and Budget Education Subcommittee Chairman Mark McBride.

“Although some of the Legislature may not be totally against what he’s done, I think everybody is concerned, and they have concerns about how the agency is being run and how the money is spent,” said McBride (R-Moore).

McBride, who was part of the education funding negotiations, explained that the Legislature was partly unwilling to grant \$100 million to just “one thing,” but members were also hesitant to appropriate that money specifically to Walters’ agency.

“The Legislature’s not going to turn him loose with \$100 million because we don’t know what he’ll do,” McBride said.

Walters time as state secretary of education and director of Every Kid Counts Oklahoma included administration of millions of dollars of federal GEER funds, a topic that has drawn interest from FBI agents and the Oklahoma Attorney General’s Office, according to people with direct knowledge of the inquiry.

McBride’s comments echo the sentiments of many in Oklahoma’s education sector who fear Walters’ advocacy for the science of reading could do as much harm as good to the movement owing to his polarizing nature.

For his part, Walters said he is not worried about the possibility his education rhetoric could affect his reading reform goals. As he pushes for science-of-reading practices in classrooms, the state superintendent billed his efforts as in line with his overall goals for OSDE.

“A lot of what I talk about is reforming the education system,” Walters said. “Some of the hardest things of being a messenger of change and reform is that people just generally are like, ‘Hey, I’ve been doing this 15 years.’ It’s tough to

admit there’s a better way of doing it.”

While many of Walters’ other efforts at reform — including advocating for school choice and getting what he calls “indoctrination” out of schools — have seemed to divide the education world and provoke the ire of education leaders, some science-of-reading advocates say the movement has enough momentum to sustain itself both with Walters’ support and despite it.

“I certainly don’t think that this volatile situation is helping anything,” Dillard said. “But just in all fairness, I wouldn’t be able to lay the resistance, the implementation of the work, at the foot of any politician.”

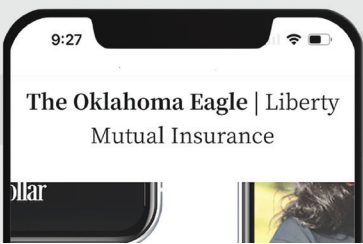
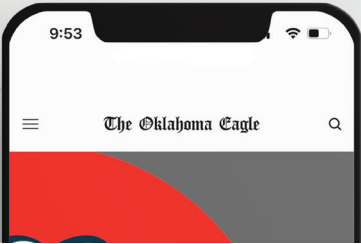
Frohling echoed a similar sentiment.

“I don’t think [Walters] will do more harm than good. However, I am fearful that those who don’t support him — that no matter what he says — they’ll turn their focus on whatever they don’t agree with rather than the good,” Frohling said. “However, I think there’s a rising tide with the dyslexia awareness — with the dyslexia awareness training, with the dyslexia screeners — with all of these other things that have gone into play (...) I think that there’s enough other voices to say this is the right thing to do.”

Walters said science-of-reading-based practices should be the sort of topic that can be supported by Oklahoma education advocates across the board.

“No matter what you think about me — doesn’t matter if you agree with me on everything — let’s put the kids first and make sure that our kids are getting the best education possible,” Walters said.

BENNETT BRINKMAN has become NonDoc’s education reporter in August 2022 after completing a reporting internship. He holds a bachelor’s degree in journalism from the University of Oklahoma and is originally from Edmond. Email story tips and ideas to bennett@nondoc.com.org.



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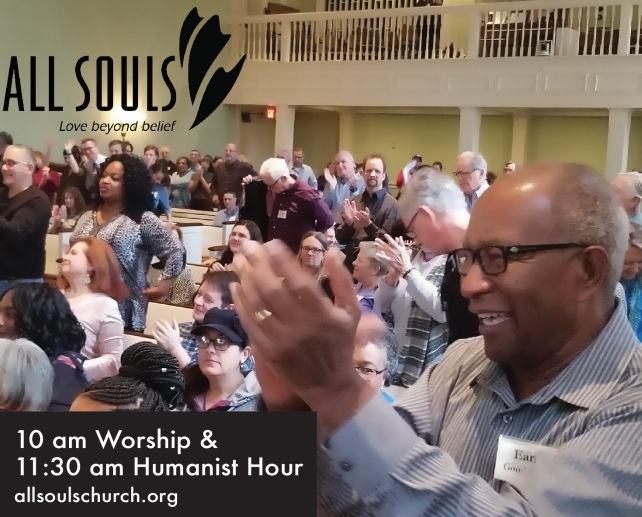
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WHY MASS INCARCERATION Still Has Mass Appeal

By HIRAM JACKSON, WORD IN BLACK

THERE'S PLENTY OF PROFIT TO BE MADE BY EXPLOITING BLACK PEOPLE IN AMERICA'S SYSTEM OF PUNITIVE LAWS, PRIVATIZATION, AND SYSTEMIC RACISM.

America's love affair with incarceration unnecessarily deprives people of their freedom. It also comes with enormous social and economic costs for formerly incarcerated individuals, their families, and their communities.

More than 10.2 million people are held in penal institutions throughout the world, mostly as pre-trial detainees, remand prisoners, or sentenced prisoners. Although the United States is home to just 5% of the world's population, the nation has 25% of the world's imprisoned population.

Data compiled by the Prison Policy Initiative shows roughly 1.9 million people are incarcerated in the U.S. in 2023 — in state prisons, federal prisons, or local jails — the highest rate in the Western world. Another 803,000 Americans are on parole, and 2.9 million are on probation.

The prison and jail incarceration rate in the United States remains between five and eight times that of France, Canada, and Germany, and imprisonment rates in Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Oklahoma are nearly 50% above the national average.

But before delving into racial disparities run rampant in the penal system — like how one in five Black men born in 2001 is likely to experience imprisonment within their lifetime, which is a decline from one in three for those born in 1981 — we must address what is an even larger issue.

Why does the justice system, like a game of Monopoly, dole out the “go straight to jail, do not pass go” card so readily?

Most incarcerated people, approximately 96% in 2021 and 2022, had sentences of over a year. The demographic distribution of incarcerated people remained consistent over the two years, with 32% being Black, 31% white, 23% Hispanic, 10% multiracial or of another race, 2% American Indian or Alaska Native, and 1% Asian, Native Hawaiian, or other Pacific Islander.

According to the experts, the main drivers are (1) changes in laws leading to longer, often mandatory, sentences, (2) “truth-in-sentencing” legislation requiring individuals convicted of violent crimes to serve at least 80% of their sentences, and (3) increased use of incarceration for non-violent crimes, and (4) prison privatization.

Behind that legal lingo lies a deep-rooted and much more intrinsic reason, layered in unnecessary and discretionary punishment and a system's unwavering resolve to make the least capable pay.

Cash Rules Everything Around Incarceration

“It is said that no one truly knows a nation until one has been inside its jails. A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but its lowest ones,” Nelson Mandela said.

But many people who are arrested are trapped in dismal local jail conditions waiting, no, hoping for deliverance.

Local jails have become modern-day quasi-debtors' prisons because many of those being held are there simply because they cannot afford cash bail. So they languish and wait for a day in court, which, depending on where you live, might be a months or years-long process. The wheels of justice grind to a near halt for those without the funds to make them turn more quickly.

Consider the profitability side of the prison equation, and things get clearer. Thousands of private corporations rake in \$80 billion a year in profits from America's carceral system. Bail bond businesses alone make \$1.4 billion a year from folks who can pony up the cash to get their loved ones out of jail.

Some of the biggest winners in the mass incarceration scheme are the for-profit prison companies whose business models essentially depend on the number of inmates held in these private institutions.

Currently, the government sends \$3.8 billion in federal grants to states and cities for criminal justice purposes. Unfortunately, these grants largely go out on autopilot, pressuring states to increase the number of arrests, prosecutions, and people put in prison without requiring a public safety reason.

The reluctance evident in correcting sentencing excesses, particularly for violent crimes as supported by criminological evidence, prolongs the harm and futility of mass incarceration.

The Jobs Opportunity Task Force, a nonprofit advocating for improved skills, jobs, and incomes, recently drew attention to the wide-reaching effects of incarceration. They revealed that approximately 113 million adults in the U.S., or roughly 45%, have a family member with a history of imprisonment, and 79 million individuals possess a criminal record — greatly impacting opportunities for meaningful employment for the formerly incarcerated, regardless of guilt or innocence.

An even sadder reality, though, is that one year of housing a prisoner is comparable to the cost of a year of college.

Black and Behind Bars, Possibly for Life

But back to the racial disparities, another scourge of mass incarceration. In 2021, Black adults were five times as likely to be incarcerated as white adults, and Black youth were just over four times as likely to be locked up in the juvenile justice system as their white peers. In seven states — California, Connecticut, Iowa, Minnesota, New Jersey, Maine, and Wisconsin — Black adults are incarcerated nine times more often than their white peers.

Twenty-eight states exercise some form of a “three strikes” law, which automatically sentences individuals convicted of a third offense to harsher penalties and, in some cases, life sentences.

Yes, life in prison for offenses ranging from an indiscretion as marginal as failed custody cases, low-level drug possession, and non-violent misdemeanors.

In California, which has had a three-strikes law since 1994, more than half of the people incarcerated by the law are doing time for nonviolent crimes. Due to the work of activists, in 2012, Californians voted to amend the law, eliminating life sentences for nonviolent crimes. It's estimated the change will save the Golden State \$1 billion over the next decade.

The three strikes you're out rule should be for baseball, not life-long deprivation of freedom.

The bottom line is that the American penal system doesn't value human life. Instead, our courts prefer to address individual transgressions and crimes by imposing bigger and more brutal infringements on hapless citizens who encounter the criminal justice system's peculiarly punitive measures. These measures operate as intended: to cause long-term suffering and pain.

In this country, the punishment rarely really fits the crime. Meanwhile, Black people keep suffering while prison profiteers laugh all the way to the bank.

HIRAM JACKSON is the CEO & Publisher of Real Times Media, which includes The Michigan Chronicle, a partner in the Word In Black collaborative.



PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

A DECAYING WATER SYSTEM IS
WRECKING A BLACK TOWN IN ALABAMA

A mostly Black town on the Gulf Coast, faces a water crisis from deterioration pipes and flooding. A14

PA SEEKS TO EXPAND PUBLIC AWARENESS OF ITS
INDIGENOUS CULTURE AND HISTORY

An absence of federally recognized tribal nations means there's been an incomplete picture of its Native American culture and history. A14

How Black-Owned Credit Unions Empower Their Communities

By BRIA OVERS, WORD IN BLACK

BLACK-OWNED CREDIT UNIONS

Leaders at credit unions want to change how Black Americans feel about banking and financial wellness, one account at a time.



PHOTOS ADOBE IMAGES

When traditional banks turned away Black Americans, credit unions welcomed them with open arms.

Different from a bank, credit unions are not-for-profit financial institutions. And Black-led and Black-serving institutions understand the nuances and history of being Black.

They were created for the underserved, says Renee Sattiewhite, president and CEO of the African American Credit Union Coalition. “When banks would not take people, regardless of color, credit unions started to be a place where people of modest means could pull their money together and then loan it out to one another.”

This concept has benefited communities and created a different way of banking. A report from the Federal Reserve found that Black Americans are the country’s least banked racial group. They have the highest rates of being “unbanked” and “underbanked” at 13% and 27%, respectively, and were most often denied or approved for less credit than they requested, regardless of household income.

Black credit unions know their communities’ obstacles, says Dina Hairston, CEO of the Atlanta-based 1st Choice Credit Union. “The benefit when you come to our institutions, or even just a credit union in general, is that a lot of those barriers are removed,” she says. “We look at the full person, the full picture, from the financial standpoint.”

1st Choice is a minority-owned Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI). Because of its special designation, 60% of the institution’s lending must go to low- and moderate-income demographics or the unbanked, says Hairston.

There’s a clear gap and historic issue with banking. But credit union leaders focused on serving this population say increasing access to money and opportunities is ingrained in their operations.

“Credit unions are geared toward helping the community,” Hairston says. “We’re really people helping people as a cooperative.”

More than a Customer

Credit unions do not have “customers” like banks do. According to the National Credit Union Administration, they are member-owned — owned and controlled by those who use their services.

Each member owns a share of the credit union and can sit on their cooperative’s board. “That does not happen in a bank,” says Sattiewhite.

Qualifications for joining a credit union differ by institution. Requirements depend on an employer, location, affiliation to a group like a union or association, or whether a family member is already a member.

This approach is part of the appeal of working with a credit union.

“Any profits that we turn, we reinvest back into our membership with lower interest rates,” Hairston says. “We don’t have the higher fees that you’re going to see with the banks.”

Sheila Montgomery, CEO of Florida A&M University Federal Credit Union, says traditional banking systems are “exclusive,” but Black credit unions “allow us to be inclusive for the communities we serve.”

Florida A&M University is a Historically Black College and University. Its credit union is one of the oldest in the state and the second-largest HBCU credit unions in the nation. Members are alumni, students, employees, and local community members in Tallahassee, Florida.

Financial institutions rely on credit scores to determine interest rates and eligibility for some banking products. Montgomery says this is “risk-based pricing.” Black-owned and -operated credit unions know this factor disproportionately affects their members.

According to Bankrate, Black communities have fair credit — one step above poor — and the median credit score is 627. Those with fair credit see higher interest rates, unfavorable terms, fewer loan options, more expensive security deposits for housing, and more.

Sattiewhite, Hairston, and Montgomery agree that credit unions seek ways to work with their members instead of denying them opportunities.

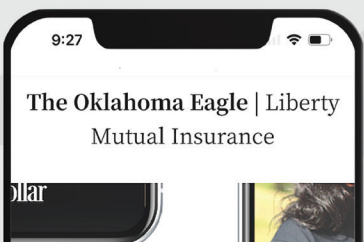
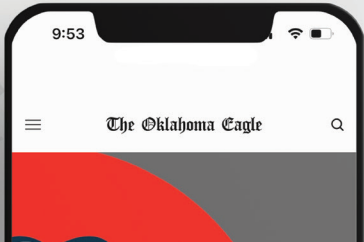
“Most credit unions will operate the same,” Sattiewhite says. “You will find the same level of service or the commitment to be of service. At credit unions, you’re a person, not a number, not a dollar sign.”



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To amplify our core value of equity, through journalism and editorial” is the cornerstone of our continued success.



A Decaying Water System Is Wrecking a Black Town in Alabama

By WILLY BLACKMORE, WORD IN BLACK
ALABAMA WATER SYSTEM from A13



ONE DAY THERE, THE NEXT GONE, a tricycle sits outside a seemingly abandoned single-story apartment complex in Prichard, Alabama. PHOTO LIZ O. BAYLEN / LOS ANGELES TIMES

Prichard, a mostly Black town on the Gulf Coast, faces a water crisis from deterioration pipes and flooding, forcing residents out.

It doesn't take much to make the streets of Alabama Village flood. Originally built as worker housing for the shipyards in nearby Mobile, streets in the Prichard, Alabama, neighborhood are regularly awash in water.

It's partly because of the heavy rainstorms that are common along the Gulf Coast, increasingly so due to climate change. But the compounding issue in Prichard is the municipal water system, which is so decrepit that nearly 60% of the 19,000-person town's drinking water is lost due to leaks in service lines and water mains.

With so much water, some 73 million gallons a month, already needing to drain out of the sewers before even one drop of rain falls, the town's drainage system is essentially brimming at all times. And until last week, the very poor and 91% Black residents of Prichard were the ones paying the price — not only with the flooding, but dangerously low water pressure (fire hydrants often can't supply water in the event of a fire), and monthly water bills as high as \$7,000.

Now, the Prichard Water Works and Sewer Board, which procures and delivers water for the town of

19,000 (with no water source of its own, nearly all of Prichard's water is bought from Mobile) is being placed under receivership after being sued by Synovus Bank, one of the holders of a \$55 million bond that the board defaulted on.

There is a separate effort underway, spearheaded by the Southern Environmental Law Center, to get the Environmental Protection Agency to use emergency powers on behalf of the rate-paying residents, some of whom may lose their homes as a result of the dramatic state of disrepair that the water system is in.

As the SELC petition to the EPA explains, "the Board is now threatening to shut down the water for approximately 200 residents where the greatest loss occurs. These residents would be forced out of their homes."

Forced Out by Eminent Domain

Many of those homes are in Alabama Village. If the plan goes through, the state would use its eminent domain powers to buy residents out of their homes, regardless of whether or not they want to leave. Renters would have to relocate without any financial support from the state.

The neighborhood is deeply blighted, dotted with burned-down homes (some of which might still be standing if the water system was properly maintained and had enough pressure for the fire hydrants to work) and a variety of refuse that people dump on the streets in the area; the market value for the homes there will likely not be enough to pay all the costs for families to relocate.

Like Flint, Jackson, New Orleans, and so many other

American towns that have faced water crises, Prichard is deeply, historically Black. It borders on Africatown, a community founded by people who were forcibly carried from West Africa to Alabama on the Clotida, which is considered to be the last slave ship to dock in the United States.

While Prichard prospered in the post-war era, and was both larger and more diverse at the time, the combination of white flight and the collapse in the ship-building industry in Mobile hit the town hard.

Today, the average household income is just over \$30,000 annually. While the dwindling tax base certainly contributed to the very old pipes being neglected (some were originally installed around 80 years ago), some water board members were indicted last year for allegedly buying luxury goods and other items on board credit cards at the same time the utility was claiming it could not make repairs in places like Alabama Village.

The EPA has yet to respond to the SELC petition, and while figuring out how to save money in part by reducing water losses will invariably be central to the receivership's management of the utility, it's unclear how or when residents will be able to rely on Prichard's water system. And while the town remains in limbo, the situation is forcing some people to leave.

"The city and the water people think the less they do, the more people will move out," resident Betty Catlin told Inside Climate News. "They want us to fade away."

Willy Blackmore is a freelance writer and editor covering food, culture, and the environment. He lives in Brooklyn.

Pennsylvania Seeks To Expand Public Awareness Of Its Indigenous Culture And History

By ASSOCIATED PRESS
INDIGENOUS CULTURE from A1

BETHLEHEM, Pa. (AP) — Pennsylvania's absence of federally recognized tribal nations means there's been an incomplete picture of its Native American culture and history, officials said Friday as they announced a grant-funded program designed to change that.

The Pennsylvania Tourism Office, in partnership with Lehigh University's Institute for Indigenous Studies and with input from federally recognized tribes, will develop a plan to highlight the state's Indigenous stories, culture and history through a grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission.

Pennsylvania is behind other states in its consideration of Indigenous culture and history, compared with Midwestern states, said Jason Hale, a researcher from the Institute for Indigenous Studies, Lehigh University. Hale is from the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation near Mayetta, Kansas.

The grant will allow them to change that.

"It comes right under the mission of what we do to connect and to help Indigenous tribal nations grow and

become healthier," he said, noting that the institute is within the College of Health, in which the research team works to address health and educational disparities among Native Americans.

"So we feel this is a great start and lays the foundation for what we can do as an institute working with Lehigh University our College of Health and in the Greater Lehigh Valley community," he said.

Tribal nations in Pennsylvania have largely been erased, and some, such as the Susquehannock and Monongahela peoples, do not exist any longer, said Andrea Lowery, executive director of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.

Some tribal nations consider Pennsylvania an ancestral homeland despite having been forced out of the state and despite the history of oppression and marginalization, she said.

"There's a lot we've learned about Native American history in Pennsylvania through archaeological evidence and historic documents, but this does not present a complete picture," she said. "The tribes are

keepers of their culture, their language, their history. And their interpretation of this history is critical to try to understand Pennsylvania."

Lehigh University's Bethlehem campus is home to the Delaware Nation of Oklahoma's extension Tribal Historic Preservation Office, which is part of their Lenape homelands. The Delaware Nation of Oklahoma will consult on the project, officials said.

Over the next two years, the Institute for Indigenous Studies will convene a group of scholars and tribal members to outline specific projects. The tourism office will then seek to bring the projects to fruition, said Carrie Fischer Lepore, deputy secretary of tourism at the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development.

"Right now, Indigenous nations receive almost no representation in Pennsylvania culture, and that's a mistake," she said during a news conference Friday at Lehigh University, "because Pennsylvania is steeped in Indigenous history, a rich history of food, travel, folklore and so much more."

The hope is that some of the projects will be completed in time for the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, she added. The grant is for \$100,000, and the tourism office is contributing another \$100,000.

The history of Pennsylvania's Native peoples has often been framed in terms of their interactions with Europeans, and particularly the conflicts that stemmed from the Europeans' arrival. The new grant-funded initiative aims to widen the lens.

The hope is to highlight and promote the stories, as well as better the economic opportunities of the Appalachian counties and Native people and tribal nations that want to take part, said Sean M. Daley, director of the Institute for Indigenous Studies at Lehigh University.

"While this project will not address all the problems Native peoples face nor fix them, it is at least a step in a new and right direction and will hopefully lead to long-term and ongoing dialogues and collaborations with Pennsylvania's native peoples and tribal nations," he said.