

LEGACY  
5,366

Weeks, since the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre and a denial of justice.

NATION  
The Road To Reparations | A15  
*By* HERB BOYD, WORD IN BLACK

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SPECIAL: BLACK HISTORY MONTH



## Following the passing of Nex Benedict, serious questions linger

**Owasso, Okla.** – On the morning of Feb. 26, a group of gender equality advocates and supporters gathered on a busy intersection in this Tulsa suburb, in the shadow of Owasso High School, where two weeks earlier, three students bullied and beat **Nex Benedict, a 16-year-old sophomore** at the school who identified as non-binary. Benedict died the next day in Bailey Medical Center, a hospital a few blocks away from the scene of the rally. The crowd, mainly composed of **Owasso High students** (about 40 of whom had joined a walk-out protest) and **alumni, LGBTQ+ advocates, and concerned citizens** from the town of Owasso or nearby Tulsa, wanted to support Nex and their family. **BY GARY LEE**

# the hatred



### INSIDE

**State Schools Face New Student Test Standards: TPS ‘Not There Yet’**  
John Neal, The Oklahoma Eagle, A6

**School Board Candidates Are Seeking Your Vote: Crucial Election**  
Kimberly Marsh, The Oklahoma Eagle, A9

**Senate sends Stitt bill eliminating state share of sales tax on groceries**  
Michael McNutt, NonDoc, A7

**Judge Sides With Defendant in Lawmakers’ Open Records Lawsuit**  
Keaton Ross, Oklahoma Watch, A9

**Talk of Greenwood: Celebrating the lives of Tulsans every week**  
Dr. Jerry Goodwin, The Oklahoma Eagle, A18

**Last Week’s Headlines**  
*Just in case you missed it.* A4

**Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher**  
*Oklahoma Civil Rights Activist.* A4

**Jobs & Classifieds**  
*Discover career opportunities.* A12

**Faith In Tulsa**  
*The Eagle Church Directory.* A13



8 10499 02044 7



STATE SCHOOLS FACE NEW  
STUDENT TEST STANDARDS | A6

SCHOOL BOARD CANDIDATES  
ARE SEEKING YOUR VOTE | A9

DOES OKLAHOMA HAVE SOME OF THE  
LOWEST WAGES IN THE NATION? | A9



PHOTO SAM LEVRAULT MEDIA

Nex Benedict  
From A1 Cover

Taking a stand against hatred

Using banners, short speeches, and interviews, they praised the courage and dignity of the 16-year-old who had been a straight-A life-loving student unabashed about their Queer identity. “We’re here to raise up the memory of Nex and aid their family at this difficult time,” Sue Hudson, one of the participants, told The Oklahoma Eagle. Hudson, who identifies as Queer, had driven from Tulsa for the event. “Through all the sadness and anger, it makes me happy to know that so many people are showing up to express their solidarity.”

**Protesting anti- LGBTQ+ culture**  
But attendees of the rally were more than a support group. They came to push back. In interviews with The Oklahoma Eagle, many said that a big part of their mission was to protest the anti-LGBTQ+ culture at the school and across Oklahoma. “It’s a culture of hate” explained Aren Deakins, one of the protestors. “It’s a culture created by conservative politicians, negligent school administrators, and right-wing citizens in Oklahoma that gave rise to a situation where a death like Nex’s could occur, and no school official, hospital, or other person of authority would take responsibility for what happened.”

“It’s that culture that needs to change, and until it does, it will be hard to protect Queer people like Nex,” added Deakins, a 2018 Owasso High School graduate, who identifies as Queer. “This is a case of a missing and murdered kid who was Queer,” said Jordan Harman, one of the activists, in an interview with The Oklahoma Eagle. “I have questions. One big one is: Why was this student not protected from bullying? We want answers.” Jordan, based in Tulsa, also identifies as Queer and is a member of Two Spirits (www.twospirits.com), a support group dedicated to building a safe space for Queer Indigenous people.

**The latest battleground**  
The conservative Oklahoma town of Owasso (pop. 40,000) is the latest battle site in a war over LGBTQ+ rights that has been taking place across the U.S. for the past couple of years. In 2022, students and activists across Florida staged school walkouts in response to legislation — dubbed the “Don’t Say Gay” bill — that would prohibit discussing sexual orientation and gender identity in the state’s primary schools. The statement passed the Florida legislature and was signed into law by Gov. Ron DeSantis in 2022. In 2023, North Dakota rights activists

Cont. A3





PHOTO GARY LEE

Nex Benedict

# “It’s a culture of hate”

From A2

launched protests against several bills conservative lawmakers tried to pass. One of the most disputed statutes, which allows teachers to ignore the pronouns of transgender students, was passed and signed into law.

In this 2024 election season, LGBTQ+ rights are emerging as an increasingly tense issue on the national level and in various states.

In 2023 and 2024, Oklahoma’s GOP-controlled legislature also tried to push through a record number of bills that would undercut the rights of the state’s LGBTQ+ community. According to the account of the American Civil Liberties Union, conservative Oklahoma lawmakers have introduced 54 bills that target LGBTQ+ rights – more than any other state.

## History of anti-LGBTQ+ culture

The fight for gender equality is far from new to Oklahoma, a state whose population includes around 138,000 people who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community – or 3.8 percent of the population, according to a survey by the Williams Institute at the Law School at UCLA. Of that total, nine percent are Black, nine percent are Indigenous, 12 percent are LatinX, and most of the rest are white, according to the Williams Institute’s account.

Nicole McAfee, executive director of Freedom Oklahoma, used her speech at a vigil in Tulsa to set the record straight on the ongoing fights between gender equality advocates and conservative state lawmakers. Nex’s story was not a wake-up call,” she said. “We’ve been screaming for help.”

“We know that no one is going to come to save us but us,” McAfee added.

The LGBTQ+ leader said earlier actions by the state were “all new versions of old tactics meant to isolate and cause despair” in the LGBTQ+ community.

However, several aspects of Benedict’s case have merited particular attention. One is the victim’s youth. The case has highlighted the harrowing plight of LGBTQ+ students in Oklahoma.

In the wake of Benedict’s death, youth in Oklahoma are increasingly seeking help from crisis hotlines, according to new data from the Rainbow Youth Project (RYP).

The Indiana-based nonprofit, one

of several organizations that provides LGBTQ+ mental health crisis counseling via the national 988 hotline, reported last week that they received 349 calls from Oklahoma between Feb. 16-20. That compares to an average of 87 weekly calls from Oklahoma before Benedict’s death.

Of the Oklahomans who called the hotline, two-thirds said they were experiencing distress about Benedict’s death, by the Rainbow Project’s account. Eighty-five percent said they also experienced bullying at school or online, and seventy-nine percent feared for their physical safety. More than 10 percent were students or parents of students at Owasso High.

The intersection between Benedict’s sexual orientation and ethnic background has also raised the profile of the case. Benedict was descended from Choctaw Natives, one of the tribes that were moved to Oklahoma in the early 1800s. In Oklahoma, home to 39 tribal nations, Queer indigenous people have found unity in the Two Spirit culture. Two Spirit is an umbrella term meant to unify various gender identities and expressions among Indigenous, Native American, Alaskan Native, and First Nations people.

Benedict identified as non-binary and used the pronouns they/them and he/him. Non-binary is defined as “a person whose gender identity does not conform to the gender binary, which is the erroneous idea that only two distinct and opposite genders exist, male and female.”

Questions about how Owasso local school district administrators managed Benedict’s situation – and other bullying instances – are among the most niggling in this episode.

In an interview with police in the hospital, Benedict reported that three students had been bullying them. Benedict said they threw water on the other students. The bullies then jumped Benedict in the bathroom and beat them. During the fight, Benedict lost consciousness. Following the war, school administrators declined to report the incident to the City of Owasso Police Department. They also reportedly suspended the attackers and Benedict. They recommend Benedict seek medical treatment. Benedict’s mother took them to Bailey Medical Center.

The handling of the case appears to follow a pattern in which school administrators assign blame to both the perpetrator and victims of altercations. While Owasso school officials declined interview requests,

several students confirmed the policy of punishing both victims and perpetrators in school fights.

Amethyst Johnson, a 15-year-old student at Owasso High who identifies as Queer, described a “culture of constant hate” against LGBTQ+ students at the school.

Johnson said that other students have bullied and harassed them regularly. The school does little to punish the bullies or control the anti-LGBTQ+ atmosphere.

Johnson reported that in November 2023, several students bullied him like Benedict’s incident. School officials summoned him and the attackers and suspended them all.

“I don’t think that’s a fair policy,” Johnson told The Oklahoma Eagle. “If the school did not protect bullies and attackers, what happened to Nex could have been avoided.”

## Owasso school officials respond

School administrators in Owasso have issued statements expressing their condolences and clarifying that they do not tolerate bullying.

Brock Crawford, a spokesman for the Owasso school district, told news media that the school investigates every bullying report.

“As a district, the safety and security of our students is our top priority, and we are committed to fostering a safe and inclusive environment for everyone,” he said in an email. “Bullying in any form is unacceptable.”

On March 1, the U.S. Department of Education said it is investigating Owasso High School’s treatment of Benedict’s case.

The Human Rights Campaign (HRC), a national organization fighting for LGBTQ+ rights, filed a complaint with the department following Benedict’s death. The federal investigation is the first response to HRC’s complaint.

Another big unanswered query in the case is what was Benedict’s cause of death? In a preliminary report, Owasso Police Department said that their death was not a result of the trauma of the fight they endured at the high school the previous day.

However, independent medical experts interviewed by The Oklahoma Eagle questioned that conclusion. One Tulsa-based medical doctor, who asked not to be named because they had not read a full medical report, said that it was premature to make any assessment about the cause of

death until a full autopsy is conducted.

Medical examiners are conducting a complete autopsy. Benedict’s family has also said that they are pursuing an independent examination.

On Sunday evening, Feb. 25, several hundred locals gathered at Guthrie Green in downtown Tulsa to mourn Benedict’s life and offer support to the LGBTQ+ community in Tulsa, Owasso, and throughout Oklahoma. With candles glimmering in the dusk of an unseasonably mild evening, the event exhibited the warmth and breadth of feeling and support for Benedict and their untimely passing.

Following prayers, over two dozen speakers supported Benedict, their family, and other LGBTQ+ youth. Among them were Dr. Tiffany Crutcher, founder of the Crutcher Foundation and a social activist, and Daniel McHenry, founder of the group Black Queer Tulsa. Both pointed out that Black and brown Tulsans are also frequent victims of anti—LGBTQ+ discrimination.

State Rep. Melissa Provenzano (D-79, Tulsa) was one of the early speakers.

“I just want to call on you to listen to every kid, even those who take up much of your time. Please just listen, and when they say they are being bullied, sit down, dig in, and find out what is going on. Lastly, look at the overwhelming response that has occurred nationwide. Look at this and know you are not alone. Focus on your community, helping and supporting each other, and be proud. No matter who you are, your appearance, or how you choose to live. No one deserves to be bullied and harassed. Thank you for being exactly who you are.”

## Speakers blasted Oklahoma lawmakers

As speaker after speaker took to the podium, many also used the occasion to lay the blame for Nex’s death on Oklahoma’s anti- LGBTQ+ public officials and the rules they have issued to beat back the rights of the community.

Whitney Cipolla, a board member of Oklahomans For Equality, which advocates for the LGBTQ+ community, summed up the sentiments of other speakers well.

“Book bans curriculum bans bathroom bills, denying gender-affirming health care prohibiting showing any sign of visibility or support for the queer community. That distracts us from the real issues we’re facing



# Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher : OK Civil Rights Activist

By MELVIN C. HALL, THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF OKLAHOMA HISTORY AND CULTURE



Oklahoma Civil Rights activist Ada Lois Sipuel was born February 8, 1924, in Chickasha, Oklahoma. An excellent student, she graduated from Lincoln High School in 1941 as valedictorian. Initially, she enrolled in Arkansas A&M College at Pine Bluff. After one year she transferred to Langston University in September 1942, and she majored in English and dreamed of being a lawyer. On March 3, 1944, she married Warren Fisher. On May 21, 1945, Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher graduated from Langston University with honors.

Even in education, Oklahoma was segregated. Langston University did not have a law school, and state statutes prohibited blacks from attending white state universities. Instead, Oklahoma provided funding whereby they could go outside the state of Oklahoma and attend law schools and graduate schools that accepted blacks. At the urging of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) twenty-one-year-old Fisher agreed to seek admission to the University of Oklahoma’s law school in order to challenge Oklahoma’s segregation laws and achieve her lifelong ambition of becoming a lawyer.

On January 14, 1946, she applied for admission to the University of Oklahoma College of Law. After reviewing Fisher’s credentials, the university’s president, Dr. George Lynn Cross, advised her that there was no academic reason to reject her application for admission, but that Oklahoma statutes prohibited whites and blacks from attending classes together. The laws also made it a misdemeanor to instruct or attend classes comprised of mixed races. Cross would have been fined up to fifty dollars a day, and the white students who attended class with her would have been fined up to twenty dollars a day.

On April 6, 1946, with the support of civic leaders from across the state, Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher filed a lawsuit in the Cleveland County District Court, prompting a three-year legal battle. A young

attorney, Thurgood Marshall, later a U.S. Supreme Court Justice, represented Fisher. She lost her case in the county district court and appealed to the Oklahoma Supreme Court. It sustained the ruling of the lower court, finding that the state’s policy of segregating whites and blacks in education did not violate the United States Constitution.

After an unfavorable ruling from the Oklahoma Supreme Court, Fisher filed an appeal with the U.S. Supreme Court. On January 12, 1948, the nation’s highest tribunal ruled in Sipuel v. Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma that Oklahoma must provide Fisher with the same opportunities for securing a legal education as it provided to other citizens of Oklahoma. The case was remanded to the Cleveland County District Court to carry out the ruling. Following the Court’s favorable ruling, the Oklahoma Legislature, rather than admit Fisher to the Oklahoma University law school or close the law school to students both black and white, decided to create a separate law school exclusively for her to attend. The new school, named Langston University School of Law, was thrown together in five days and was set up in the State Capitol’s Senate rooms. Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher refused to attend Langston University School of Law, and on March 15, 1948, her lawyers filed a motion in the Cleveland County District Court contending that Langston’s law school did not afford the advantages of a legal education to blacks substantially equal to the education whites received at OU’s law school. This inequality, they argued, entitled Fisher to be admitted to the University of Oklahoma College of Law. However, the Cleveland court ruled against her, finding that the two state law schools were “equal.” The Oklahoma Supreme Court, predictably, upheld the finding.

After this second adverse ruling Fisher’s lawyers announced their intention to again appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court. However, Oklahoma Attorney

General Mac Q. Williamson declined to return to Washington, D.C., and face the same nine Supreme Court justices in order to argue that Langston’s law school was equal to OU’s law school. As a result of this concession, on June 18, 1949, more than three years after Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher first applied for admission to the University of Oklahoma College of Law, she was admitted. Langston University’s law school closed twelve days later.

Although Fisher was generally welcomed by her white classmates, she was forced to sit in the back of the room behind a row of empty seats and a wooden railing with a sign designated “colored.” All black students enrolled at the University of Oklahoma were provided separate eating facilities and restrooms, separate reading sections in the library, and roped-off stadium seats at the football games. These conditions persisted through 1950.

However, the end of segregation in higher education had already begun. In 1948 a group of six black Oklahomans applied to University of Oklahoma’s graduate schools in disciplines ranging from zoology to social work. All were denied admission under the same statute that denied admission to Fisher. Thurgood Marshall selected one of the six students, George W. McLaurin, to present yet another challenge to segregation in higher education. In a June 5, 1950, U.S. Supreme Court decision in the case of McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents, the Court ruled that the restrictions of segregation imposed on McLaurin at OU impaired and inhibited his ability to study. The decision meant that blacks could no longer be segregated at OU and could now be admitted to graduate schools at all state-supported colleges and universities in the nation. The state soon realized that it could not create separate graduate programs for blacks similar to the sham law school it had quickly invented for Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher.

ADA SIPUEL FISHER signing the register of attorneys, 1952 (21412.M657.12, Z. P. Meyers/Barney Hillerman Photographic Collection, OHS).

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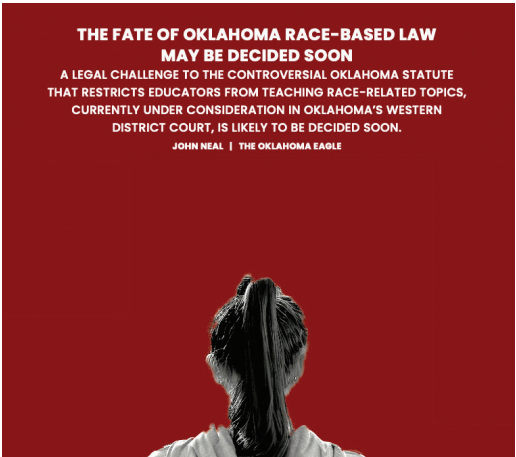
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The Fate Of Oklahoma Race-based Law May Be Decided Soon



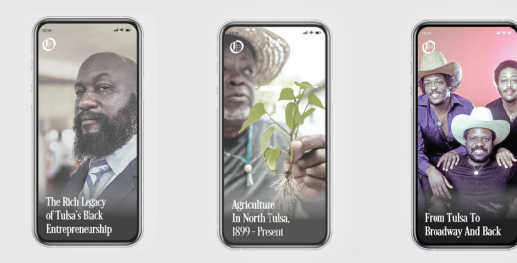
TEDC launches an initiative to help Tulsans boost financial profiles



Photo Gallery: Tulsa hosts its 45th annual MLK Day Parade

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PHOTO SAM LEVRAULT MEDIA

Nex Benedict

# Why was this student **not** protected?

From A3

in Oklahoma — the leaders making these decisions. I want them to know they are not protecting our youth. They are actively doing harm.”

She added, “I want to say to the youth here tonight. I am so sorry that so many of the adults in this state have failed you, but I also want you to know that there are also so many adults across the state who love you and want to see you thrive, not just survive.”

More than 350 organizations – from both in and outside Oklahoma – that support LGBTQ+ rights sent a letter

last week to leaders in the Oklahoma Legislature calling for the removal of the Oklahoma State Superintendent for Public Instruction, Ryan Walters. They said his policies “disproportionately target and impact transgender, nonbinary, and gender expansive youth.”

The group addressed the correspondence to Oklahoma House Speaker Charles McCall (R-22, Atoka) and other leading members of the state legislature.

Besides demanding Walter’s removal, the letter asks the legislators “to begin an investigation” into the Oklahoma State Department of Education, which Walters

leads, to determine what actions and policies have led to the anti- LGBTQ+ culture.

With a federal investigation of Owasso schools and an autopsy of Nex Benedict underway, many key details are hanging in the air. But the past week gave those who advocate for safer schools and fairer treatment of the LGBTQ+ community a call to order.

Tulsa City Council member Laura Bellis (D-4) summarized it well during her speech the Guthrie Green vigil in Tulsa. “This is part of a systematic effort to erase queer people from public life and it will not succeed,” she said.

“Our decision makers within our public education system are accountable for keeping all of our kids safe. Our kids have rights to they have the right to be safe when they’re in school and identify who they love, We can work to prevent hate crimes and bullying in schools. There are concrete things we can do. Let’s do them.” □

GARY LEE, who wrote this story, is a veteran journalist who has devoted much of his career to writing about social justice issues. He drew from a dozen interviews and several public events to report the narrative about Nex Benedict.



PHOTO SAM LEVRAULT MEDIA

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OSBE: New Rules

# State Schools Face New Student Test Standards

## TPS ‘Not There Yet’

John Neal  
The Oklahoma Eagle

Tulsa Public Schools and other districts in the state are facing new challenges to maintain their accreditation with the state. The Oklahoma State Board of Education set new and more stringent minimum state test score requirements for reading and math at its Feb. 22 meeting. Failure to meet the revised test scores will result in school district accreditation sanctions and possibly loss of accreditation. TPS Superintendent Ebony Johnson told the state board that Tulsa is “not there yet” with student test score expectations.

In a presentation at its February meeting, Johnson said the Tulsa school district was struggling to meet the new academic benchmark imposed on Tulsa in English Language Arts, commonly referred to as reading. Nevertheless, the OSBE expanded those reading benchmarks to include all state schools and added the same minimum state testing standard for math. The new standards become effective in the current school year.

In recent months, OSBE, led by State School Superintendent of Public Instruction Ryan Walters, has imposed new academic standards on Tulsa Public Schools, making the district the genesis for the new rulemaking. Walters and the OSBE placed academic and various other demands on Tulsa Public Schools without administrative rule authority.

Walters threatened a state takeover of the district schools if TPS did not meet board expectations. TPS Superintendent Johnson has staved off state takeover with some improvement in student academic performance. But Tulsa schools still fall short of the new standards. Under the new scheme, school districts failing to achieve the standards over several successive years face state takeover or the potential closing of schools.

### The New Rules

The new “Administrative Permanent Rules” impose “academic deficiencies,” followed by accreditation warning and probation if testing benchmarks are unmet. For the first time, at least 50% of students must test at the “basic performance level” or above on reading and mathematics to meet the new standard. The Oklahoma State Testing Program (OSTP) student test scores requirement will apply to the 2023-24 school year. School districts failing to meet the new standard must show substantial progress toward the goal in subsequent years or have additional sanctions imposed.

In 2022-23, the last year of complete Oklahoma student testing results, 68% of all Oklahoma students tested at the basic level or above in reading and 62% in mathematics. However, Tulsa, Oklahoma City, and at least several other larger Oklahoma school districts failed to clear the 50% threshold in one or both categories. The Oklahoma Appleseed Center for Law and Justice tallied 62 school districts in total who would receive an academic deficiency under the new rule. School districts failing to meet the standards in 2022-23 were highest among those with predominately economically disadvantaged students according to OSDE data summaries.

Walters told the State Board the rule change was necessary at OSBE’s November meeting when he announced the proposal. “Currently, for the State of Oklahoma, we do not have anything academic in our standards.” The new statewide benchmark is nearly identical to the one previously imposed on TPS for reading scores. To that reading benchmark, the same requirement for mathematics has been added.

During the public comment period of the rulemaking, several commenters pointed out that “academic performance is affected by matters outside a school district’s control, such as poverty, absenteeism, or student mobility,” according to the OSDE summary of comments. In response to this criticism,

OSDE reported to the State Board that the agency rejected this assertion, stating “school districts at least partially at fault for academic performance cannot escape accountability.”

The OSDE Rule Impact Statement prepared for the rule change does not document district costs to meet the new academic standards. Instead, it states there will be “some economic impact” on the districts, but the department “does not anticipate any cost to the agency to implement and enforce the rule.”

### Targeting Tulsa

Establishing this academic standard by the State Board follows successive waves of demands imposed on TPS, including teacher training, financial reform, and reporting changes, improving “failing schools,” pressure to reduce administrative overhead expenses, addressing chronic absenteeism, monthly in-person updates to the board, and most recently soliciting a proposal to consider school consolidation involving closing Tulsa schools.

Superintendent Johnson has made steady progress in meeting some of these demands based on presentations to the board in recent months. However, Johnson and her administrative staff told the board that TPS continues to struggle to achieve the reading standard and still needs to move “approximately 700 of the 6,200 students from below basic into a higher-performance band.” TPS cited chronic absenteeism and a continuous infusion of new students as problems the school district faces but offered “no excuses” to the board.

The mathematics requirement gives Tulsa and other school districts little time to achieve the new benchmark in the current academic year. Sixty-five percent of TPS scored “below basic” in mathematics for 2022-23. To meet this standard, approximately 5,000 of Tulsa’s nearly 34,000 students will need to improve to the basic level score in math this year for the district to avoid a proscribed “academic deficiency” in the new rules.

Another district facing almost certain mandated sanctions for reading and math scores is Oklahoma City. The OKC district has escaped the strict scrutiny and “board orders” for corrective action from Walters and the OSBE. This has been true even though OKC schools fared worse than TPS in reading scores in 2022-23 and only slightly better in math, 63% below basic compared to 65% for TPS schools.

Walters was asked about targeting Tulsa schools when he presented the OSDE budget to legislators on Jan. 10, one day before posting the new rules. St. Rep. Meloyde Blancett (D-78, Tulsa) expressed “particular concern” about the targeting, noting to Walters, “You have been particularly hard on Tulsa.” At the February meeting, Walters lauded Superintendent Johnson’s efforts but made clear there would be strict accountability if Tulsa failed to achieve the State Board demands.

Tulsa Public Schools appear undaunted by the more demanding academic standards set forth in the new rules. When asked for comments about the rule changes, TPS provided the following statement to The Oklahoma Eagle.

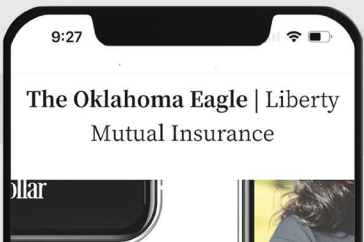
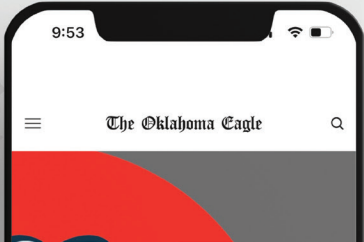
“Tulsa Public Schools administrators, school leaders, and teachers monitor and act on student data every day. Our team understands the beautiful challenge before us in educating our students, and we are up to the task. Dr. Johnson’s leadership has heightened our sense of urgency and pushed the district to work even more intentionally this school year, including in response to calls from the state for improvements in student achievement. We remain laser-focused on serving the 34,000 young people in our care every day.”

JOHN NEAL, the author, is a former resident of Sand Springs. He is well versed in urban renewal, its uses and abuse, as a former city manager in Oklahoma and departmental consultant for the city of El Paso, Texas. In 2008, he was that city’s planning pirector when the city won multiple awards for its planning accomplishments. He is now retired and resides in Austin, Texas..

The Oklahoma Eagle

## Our Mission

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





Groceries Sales Tax

# Senate sends Stitt bill eliminating state share of sales tax on groceries

Michael McNutt  
NonDoc

The State Senate today voted 42-2 to send him House Bill 1955, which would reduce to zero the state’s 4.5 percent portion of sales tax on groceries, defined in the bill as “food and food ingredients.” Locally assessed sales taxes on groceries will remain, but until June 30, 2025, any city or county sales tax election must specify that it would not apply to food items.

The measure, which passed 88-7 last year in the House of Representatives and was still eligible for consideration in the Senate this year, is on its way to Stitt for final approval. He is expected to sign it, even though Senate leaders say HB 1955’s passage means they will not approve the governor’s first choice on tax cuts: reducing the state’s personal income tax rate by 0.25 percent.

“I would still 100 percent sign it,” Stitt said Feb. 9. “From the very beginning, I’ve said, listen, that is the most regressive tax that we have.”

Thursday afternoon, Stitt released a statement celebrating HB 1955’s passage.

“Today, we get to fulfill a promise to all four million Oklahomans and pass the largest single year tax cut in Oklahoma history. Cutting the grocery tax means relief for all Oklahomans,” Stitt said. “I’ve called for tax cuts since 2019, and in 2022 I called a special session specifically to cut the grocery tax. I want to thank Speaker (Charles) McCall and the House for tirelessly fighting for tax cuts, and to (Senate) Pro Tem (Greg) Treat and the Senate for sending this to my desk.”

Although he pushed the grocery tax cut in years earlier, Stitt sought an income tax reduction last year and again last month when he called a special session one week before the Feb. 5 start of regular session. A 0.25 percent cut in the personal income tax has been estimated to drop future collections by about \$250 million for a full fiscal year.

However, during his State of the State address to lawmakers to open session, Stitt said he would “sign any tax cut that comes to my desk.”

HB 1955 would take effect in August.

“Once signed into law and after it takes effect, this will give Oklahomans relief every time they purchase groceries,” Senate President Pro Tempore Greg Treat (R-OKC) said before Thursday’s vote. “This legislation is common sense and will help everyone.”

The two senators who voted against the measure, Senate Appropriations and Budget Chairman Roger Thompson (R-Okemah) and Sen. Mary Boren (D-Norman) said they are concerned about the measure’s roughly \$418 million annualized price tag, which will leave lawmakers this year with approving mostly a flat budget at a time when the state has a number of infrastructure and other needs. They also expressed concern that local governments might increase their sales taxes now that the state’s portion is gone.

Thompson said the more than \$400 million annualized impact that will eat up almost all of what he considers to be additional recurring revenue that legislators have to appropriate or cut taxes with for the Fiscal Year 2025 budget, which takes effect July 1.

The State Board of Equalization last week certified the amount lawmakers have available to appropriate at about \$13.9 billion. Legislators are authorized to spend up to 95 percent of that amount, although they have stopped short of that percentage in recent years, and House Appropriations and Budget Chairman Kevin Wallace (R-Wellston) said that will likely be the case again for FY 2025.

While saying that eliminating the state’s portion of the grocery tax is “excellent policy,” Thompson said he is concerned about taking such a large sum out of recurring revenue. Inflation is also hitting state agencies and the state is faced with increasing operating costs, he said.

“I believe the day will come when this vote will be remembered as the beginning of the descent of our fiscal soundness,” Thompson said. “We finally got to be where we need to be. We got \$6.5 million returned this year because our credit rating went up, and we’re paying our bills.”

He recalled that Oklahoma had only \$2.03 in its Rainy Day Fund savings account in 2011. Part of the reason the savings account was so depleted stemmed from prior cuts to Oklahoma’s personal income tax rate after a couple years of high natural gas prices. Gas prices then went down, and the country went through a national recession, causing Oklahoma to cut agency budgets.

Oklahoma’s economy recovered in 2012, but another downturn occurred in 2015 through



PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES



**Oklahoma’s Constitutional Reserve or “Rainy Day” Fund has \$1.27 billion in it, and the state has another \$4.1 billion in other reserves and about \$2 billion in cash.**

2018, causing the state to have deficits ranging from \$680 million to \$1.3 billion.

“Those were difficult days,” Thompson said.

Raising taxes to generate more revenue is a Herculean task in Oklahoma, Thompson said. Passed in 1992, State Question 640 that voters passed in 1992 that requires any revenue-raising measure to receive 75 percent support in both the House and the Senate, or receive approval from voters statewide.

Lawmakers accomplished a revenue-raising feat in 2018 to generate funds used to backfill the budget deficit and provide a historic teacher pay and school funding increase, but the brutal political fight featured multiple special sessions and culminated with a teacher walkout days after the tax increases passed the Legislature.

**Treat: ‘There is no way to do more (tax cuts) at this time’**

Treat told senators he preferred to think of HB 1955’s \$418 million cost as an investment in giving Oklahomans some relief from higher grocery prices caused by inflation. He said it’s estimated that each Oklahoman will save about \$104.25 each year.

The sales tax reduction will apply to all groceries, but not items that are already prepared for immediate consumption, such as baked goods and pizza, Treat said. State sales tax will also still apply to alcoholic beverages, dietary supplements, tobacco and marijuana products.

Treat said Oklahoma is on much more solid economic ground now than in many years past.

Oklahoma’s Constitutional Reserve or “Rainy Day” Fund has \$1.27 billion in it, and the state has another \$4.1 billion in other reserves and about \$2 billion in cash.

Speaking to media after Thursday’s vote, Treat said he would consider drawing about \$1 billion from one-time available cash to pay for infrastructure projects this session.

“We have the ability to make some critical investments (...) with one-time monies,” he said.

Thompson concurred, but he said he wouldn’t want to see any more than that taken from the cash accounts.

“In 2020, we had to use \$400 million to offset a revenue shortfall, and I would be very uncomfortable to get below \$1 billion in cash,” he said.

Still, Treat said the grocery tax bill would be the only tax relief the Senate will seek this year.

“To ensure state services and recent critical investments in education and infrastructure remain intact in the long and short term, there is no way to do more at this time,” Treat said.

House Speaker Charles McCall (R-Atoka),

however, released a statement saying he remained optimistic that the Senate would consider reducing the personal income tax rate.

“There is continued work to be done to give Oklahomans back more of their hard-earned money,” McCall said. “While the grocery tax is a good first step, it is not the only action needed to accomplish that goal. The House always knew this legislation would pass if put up for a vote, and we feel the same way about the 0.25 percent income tax cut. The House would still like to see a vote taken on the income tax cut legislation that was passed to the Senate in special session and will continue to explore every opportunity to lower the tax burden for all Oklahomans.”

House Democratic Minority Leader Cyndi Munson (D-OKC) applauded the Senate for passing HB 1955, which she said “will help so many Oklahoma families.”

“For the past several legislative sessions, including special sessions, the House Democratic Caucus has filed legislation to eliminate the state sales tax on groceries to provide immediate tax relief for working Oklahomans each time they go to the grocery store,” she said in a statement.

McCall said Oklahomans would have saved more money if the Senate had acted on HB 1955 last year and if the measure that passed Thursday included its original emergency clause, which would have caused it to take effect immediately.

But Treat said having the bill take effect immediately would have been stressful for vendors and store owners who need time to adjust their systems to accommodate the change in the sales tax rate. It also gives the Oklahoma Tax Commission time to promulgate rules to accommodate the elimination of the state sales tax on groceries, he said.

Nonetheless, McCall called it “a truly historic day.”

“With the passage of House Bill 1955, the Legislature has managed to give Oklahomans the largest single year tax cut in state history (...) at a time when they need it the most,” McCall said. □

The Oklahoma Eagle

## Our Mission

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

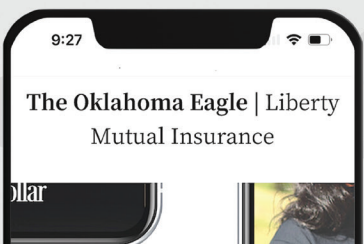
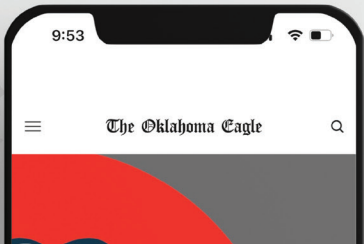






PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

Medical Debt

# Medical Debt Bill Advances To House Floor

## Oklahomans facing medical debt lawsuits could get some relief under a bill advanced by a House committee on Thursday.

Paul Monies  
Oklahoma Watch

House Bill 4148, by Rep. Suzanne Schreiber, D-Tulsa, and Rep. Mark Lepak, R-Claremore, would require health-care providers or third-party debt collectors to tell the court they made the patient aware of the costs of care before a debt-collection lawsuit can proceed.

Schreiber’s proposal came after she held an interim study in October on medical debt. Lawmakers from both parties attending that hearing shared their own frustrations with medical bills and the wide variation in costs for similar services or procedures.

In an interview Thursday, Schreiber said HB 4148 was just one of several proposals that could help Oklahomans facing medical debt collections and lawsuits. The bill would give some enforcement powers to an existing state law, the Transparency in Health Care Prices Act, passed in 2021. That law requires health-care providers to post the cash price for the top 20 services offered by that provider.

One in five Oklahomans had some type of medical debt in collections in 2022, according to The Urban Institute. The median amount in collections was close to \$900.

“This is one way that we can help the person incurring the debt to have a small bit of protection if it is taken to the judgment level,” Schreiber said of HB 4148, which passed a House Civil Judiciary panel by a vote of 10-0. It now goes to the House floor for consideration. Sen. Julie Daniels, R-Bartlesville, is the Senate author.

Schreiber said Oklahoma has one of the highest rates of medical debts in the country. Many times, patients facing past-due bills will delay or skip medical appointments because they don’t want to see additional bills. Schreiber said she and Lepak spent time talking to doctors, hospitals, insurance providers and legal experts about ideas to connect the issues of medical debt and price transparency.

“Oklahomans are suffering from medical debt, and it’s impeding our economy,” Schreiber said. “It’s impeding their ability to take care of their families and thrive.”

Oklahoma Access to Justice Foundation reviewed more than 340,000 debt collection cases filed in Oklahoma courts between 2018 and 2022. More than 8% of those cases involved medical debt, according to the data analysis done in partnership with the Legal

**Consumers many times aren’t aware they have fewer rights if they use a credit card to pay for a medical procedure or service. “When individuals put their medical bills on a credit card, that is no longer medical debt,... Once they put anything on their credit cards, that becomes financial debt and shows on your credit report in a different way than an unpaid medical bill.**

EVA STAHL, vice president of public policy, RIP Medical Debt

Services Corp. and the Pew Charitable Trust.

Katie Dilks, the foundation’s executive director, said in most of the counties across the state, proof of the debt is not required by the court to obtain a default judgment if the defendant doesn’t participate in the case.

Dilks said 40% of cases are in small claims court where defendants rarely have an attorney. Some customers simply stop opening the mail and stop answering the phone because they’re tired of calls from debt collectors, she said. It’s a risky avoidance strategy because more than half of the cases end in default judgments in favor of the medical provider.

“Our rural debt cases are really being driven by medical debt,” Dilks said at Schreiber’s legislative study in October.

Last month, KFF Health News looked into medical debt collection cases filed in Pittsburg County and found McAlester hospital officials weren’t aware of how frequently the hospital’s attorneys and debt collection companies pursued the debts from local residents.

Rich Rasmussen, president of the Oklahoma Hospital Association, said hospitals try to work with uninsured or underinsured patients on their bills. But insurance companies also have a responsibility to educate their customers on what a patient’s portion of the bill might be, he said.

“Most of the time for hospitals, we’ll work with the patient so they can develop a payment plan or if they will share the necessary information so we can classify them as charity care so there is no cost,” Rasmussen said.

Rasmussen said hospitals already have to follow a federal law, the No Surprises Act, to give an estimate of care. Many consumers aren’t aware of the co-insurance requirements or their financial responsibilities under high-deductible health insurance plans.

“It becomes very complicated for the patient,” Rasmussen said. “The federal government has laid out how we handle pricing transparency. But because the licensing of insurance falls at the state level, let’s focus on how to make the process as consumer-friendly as possible so that patients know what their responsibility is going to be.”

A bill by Rep. John Waldron, D-Tulsa, would require any debt cases that involve wage garnishment to provide the notices in plain language. HB 3179 has not yet been heard in committee. The deadline to hear bills in committee in their chamber of origin is Feb. 29.

Putting legal notices and documents in plain language helps people navigate the legal system

who can’t afford an attorney. Lawmakers last year approved HB 2792, which required eviction summonses to be in plain language.

Once past-due medical debts make it to collections or court, the system is stacked against patients, said Eva Stahl, vice president of public policy of RIP Medical Debt. Her organization uses donations to buy medical debt on the secondary market and erase it for qualifying consumers.

“We pool funds together to purchase that bad debt,” Stahl said at the interim study. “We use those fundraising dollars or government-funded programs to send these people letters to let them know their debt has been abolished and there is no tax liability.”

Stahl said consumers many times aren’t aware they have fewer rights if they use a credit card to pay for a medical procedure or service.

“When individuals put their medical bills on a credit card, that is no longer medical debt,” Stahl said. “Once they put anything on their credit cards, that becomes financial debt and shows on your credit report in a different way than an unpaid medical bill.”

The federal Consumer Financial Protection Bureau is studying consumer use of medical credit cards or installment loans, which are sometimes offered at doctor’s offices, dental practices or emergency rooms as an option for patients worried about the cost of medical care. But they can have hidden fees or deferred interest payments that can sneak up on consumers.

“In some cases, medical payment products may allow patients to access care they would otherwise have to forgo,” the agency said in its request for information. “However, these payment products can also lead to patients paying more out of pocket if patients use medical payment products to pay bills that should have been covered by insurance or financial assistance, to pay inaccurate bills which they then have difficulty disputing post-payment, or to pay bills in full whose balances they would otherwise have been able to negotiate pre-payment.”

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.



Open Records Lawsuit

Judge Sides With  
Defendant in Lawmakers’  
Open Records Lawsuit

Keaton Ross  
Oklahoma Watch

State Reps. Justin Humphrey and Kevin McDugle did not personally request communication records from District 06 District Attorney Jason Hicks and therefore are not entitled to relief under the Oklahoma Open Records Act, Stephens County District Judge Brent Russell ruled on Friday.

On April 26, 2023, Houston attorney Christina M. Vitale requested communication records from Hicks regarding the Richard Glossip case or the death row prisoner’s April 26 clemency hearing. Humphrey and McDugle were copied on the emailed request but were not explicitly identified as the requestors.

Hicks’ office denied the request, writing that he was acting in an individual capacity and therefore not obligated to provide communication records. McDugle and Humphrey filed a lawsuit seeking to overturn the denial in December, arguing that other district attorneys had provided similar records and that Hicks publicly commented on the case in an official capacity.

In the written order, Russell ruled that Humphrey and McDugle have 30 days to amend their petition to name a plaintiff with proper standing or the case will be dismissed.

During a motion to dismiss hearing held Friday morning at the Stephens County Courthouse, attorney Corbin Brewster argued that the Oklahoma Open Records Act supports a broad interpretation and it was explicitly understood that Humphrey and McDugle were the requestors. Brewster, who previously served as Tulsa County’s chief public defender, indicated the lawmakers would continue to seek relief regardless of the court’s decision.

“Dismissal will merely delay this lawsuit,” Brewster said.

Representing Hicks, Stephens County Assistant District Attorney Charles Siefers said Vitale never expressly communicated that she was representing Humphrey and McDugle. In a motion to dismiss filed last month, Sifers wrote that McDugle had an opportunity to discuss the records request with Hicks at an interim study on the death penalty but declined to do so.

“  
  
If these district attorneys are acting in a manner that I suspect they are, then we need to find out what’s their motive and why would they do that... We hope we get transparency.”

Justin Humphrey,  
Oklahoma State Representative



THE STEPHENS COUNTY COURTHOUSE in Duncan, Oklahoma. PHOTO KEATON ROSS/OKLAHOMA WATCH

In an interview with Oklahoma Watch last month, Humphrey said he and McDugle filed the initial request on a suspicion that district attorneys were coordinating to expedite Glossip’s execution.

“If these district attorneys are acting in a manner that I suspect they are, then we need to find out what’s their motive and why would they do that,” Humphrey said. “We hope we get transparency.”

Both lawmakers have been staunch supporters of Glossip’s innocence claim, appearing on national television shows to discuss the case and hosting press conferences at the Capitol to advocate on Glossip’s behalf. Glossip’s

execution has been stayed since May pending the outcome of a U.S. Supreme Court decision.

Hicks, whose jurisdiction covers Caddo, Grady, Jefferson and Stephens counties, has been an outspoken critic of State Question 780 and delays in carrying out the death penalty. He was first elected in 2010 and secured re-election unopposed in 2014, 2018 and 2022.

KEATON ROSS covers democracy and criminal justice for Oklahoma Watch. Contact him at (405) 831-9753 or Kross@Oklahomawatch.org. Follow him on Twitter at @\_KeatonRoss.

TPS Candidates

School Board Candidates Are Seeking  
Your Vote: Crucial Upcoming Election



PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

Kimberly Marsh  
The Oklahoma Eagle

Four candidates competing in the upcoming Tulsa School Board elections used a Feb. 27 public forum at the University of Tulsa to make a case for you to vote for them.

The election, scheduled to be held in just four weeks, is widely considered more important than any in recent years for Tulsa parents, educators, and anyone who supports improved public education in the city. The biggest reason is that the Oklahoma State Board of Education, under the leadership of controversial State Superintendent for Public Instruction Ryan Walters, is fighting a campaign to undercut TPS. The district’s accreditation status has been under fire since Walters led the state board to impose stricter demands to achieve higher math and reading scores over the year. If the district fails to meet the goals, Walters is threatening that TPS will lose

its accreditation and be taken over by the state. Tulsa needs a school board composed of strong leaders to overcome the takeover bid.

**Key Positions of the Candidates**

John Croisant, running for re-election in School Board District 5, said, “we have to teach every single kid, no matter their religion, no matter their ethnicity, no matter who they believe they are, every kid deserves safety. And they deserve a quality education. That means teaching the real history, not a watered-down version, and letting kids decide how to determine what’s going on to give them critical thinking skills. And every kid deserves to be safe at school.”

Teresa Pena, vying to replace Croisant in District 5, has been in her district for 54 years. She has been an educator and administrator for 35 years. She told the

audience that she has never asked a child about their parents’ political beliefs, and politics should not be a consideration influencing decisions about the students. “It is about educating the child to read and know math. It is not about politics. We are at a critical point...people must realize this,” she said. “It is important to have input. But we must educate the child first,” she said.

Sarah Smith, running in District 6, echoed the opinions of her colleagues. “We need to teach the critical thinking skills to our children,” she said. “This race is nonpartisan. And we should keep politics out of the classroom because there’s no room for that.”

Calvin Moniz is seeking to be elected in District 2, which includes part of north Tulsa. He emphasized consensus building on the board and within the district. “Politics exists because we have an unlimited need

Cont. A10

Lowest Wages

Does  
Oklahoma  
have some  
of the lowest  
wages in the  
nation?



PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

Sue Bin Park  
Oklahoma Watch

Oklahoma is ranked 10th lowest in average income and eighth lowest in median income, according to analysis of the latest 2022 Bureau of Labor Statistics data. The state was found to have an average income of \$54,998, and a median of \$55,826.

Mississippi was ranked lowest in average and median income, at \$46,248 and \$48,716, respectively. All fifty states and DC were found to have an average of \$63,442 and a median of \$69,243. ■



TPS Candidates

# Candidate perspectives & solutions

From A9

for limited resources, so we have to come together as a community. What I have found in talking to members of the community is that education is only divisive because we’re letting our leaders at the top make it divisive. When we continue to have local control of our public schools, the political divide will erase itself.”

### Hosts of the Event

The Tulsa World and the Tulsa Press Club invited the candidates to the University of Tulsa to answer a series of questions during a 90-minute session. The event occurred at TU’s Roxana Rózsa and Robert Eugene Lorton Performance Center. Each of the candidates was poised and collected. They spoke passionately about their educational values, the needs of the district, and their commitment to helping Tulsa Public Schools’ students succeed.

They said that the board meetings within the past year have been chaotic and nonproductive as the school board has been challenged with transitions and new rules forced upon them by State Superintendent Walters and the State Board of Education.

Walters led OSBE to impose stricter demands to achieve higher reading and math scores over the year under the threat of losing accreditation and being taken over by the state. He campaigned to remove former TPS Superintendent Deborah Gist, who resigned on Sept. 15, 2023. The TPS Board of Education hired Dr. Ebony Johnson with the responsibility to lead the district into compliance amidst state-mandated rule changes and regulations set by Oklahoma State officials while also coming under the scrutiny of extremist groups opposing critical race theory and teaching of history, challenging LGBTQ students’ rights and teachers’ unions, advocating book bans, and

### School Board Election Information & Important Dates

**General Election:** April 2  
**Early Voting at the Tulsa County Election Board:** March 28–29 from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.  
Last date to request Absentee Ballots: March 18

**For more information or to find your school district,** access the following website: <https://www2.tulsacounty.org/electionboard/> . Call (918) 596-5780 or email [electionboard@tulsacounty.org](mailto:electionboard@tulsacounty.org). The Tulsa County Election Board is located at 555 N. Denver Ave. Office hours are 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday.

threatening to remove teacher certifications.

Besides the contenders who appeared, two candidates - Maria Seidler of District 6 and KanDee Washington of District 2 opted not to participate.

Seidler, a local attorney, declined the invitation after initially accepting, stating to the Tulsa World in an email “without a real debate forum, no one candidate is tested for knowledge or skill set.” Seidler is reportedly representing current board members E’Lena Ashley of District 4 and Jennettie Marshall of District 3 in a lawsuit accusing TPS and several other board members of violating the state’s Open Meeting Act, circumventing Board Policy, and manipulating board proceedings. The lawsuit seeks to invalidate Ebony Johnson’s appointment as TPS Superintendent and start a national search.

Washington did not reply to multiple emails and calls, the Forum’s moderator explained.

Tulsa World education reporters Andrea Eger and Lenzy Krehbiel-Burton, and Editorial

Editor Ginnie Graham joined Editor and Tulsa Press Club president Jason Collington as facilitators for the debate. They peppered the candidates with several questions that were common to all, but in most cases, the questions were explicitly directed to only one candidate.

The continuance of local control of Tulsa Public Schools was the most critical and common theme among the candidates, with each opposing a state takeover and pledging to involve students and engage parents when weighing decisions that impact them.

### Politics and bullying

Since politics has played a significant role in the demands placed on the district, the top question of the night was how each candidate would represent constituents whose political beliefs differ.

The forum came just days after community vigils were held for Owasso High School sophomore Nex Benedict, who died after what officials described as a physical altercation with

other students in a bathroom. An investigation is ongoing regarding the cause of the student’s death.

The subject of bullying was at the forefront of issues to be resolved in public schools, especially as it relates to gender identification. The state of Oklahoma has politicized student rights by forcing parents to include their children’s birth gender on enrollment forms and requiring students to use the bathroom for the gender they were assigned at birth.

Asked if they would advocate for solid policies and practices in schools to address bullying, as well as advocating for constituents experiencing bullying problems, the candidates agreed that more personnel is needed in the schools to combat bullying and keep students safe. More emphasis should be placed on providing essential resources to address physical and emotional conflicts among students, with school resource officers, counselors, and adequate mental health as top priorities.

“Bullying is a real problem,” Moniz said. “And there are as many policies as you could possibly throw at it, but unless you take action with those policies, it’s not going to happen. Two of my areas for action for bullying are mental health and making sure that our students have the mental health abilities, capabilities, and resources that they need to be great students and work through those bullying issues. The second is to make sure that we appreciate the diversity of everybody in our schools. As we take out the diversity, equity, and inclusion education in our schools, we lose the respect for each other that we should have. That’s why bullying and things that you’re seeing that happen in Owasso are happening. Because we’re taking the initiative out of our school to help people build consensus and communities. We’re on the wrong track in Oklahoma. And my plan is to get back on the right track in Tulsa.”

### The candidates



PHOTOS PROVIDED



#### John Croisant, Dist. 5

John Croisant has lived in District 6 since 2017 but has worked as an educator within District 5. He said he is running for reelection to a seat on the Board to help Tulsa students.

“After being a teacher at Edison for 12 years and a soccer coach, I started my insurance agency. I have the opportunity to give back to the community. And instead of just helping 2,000 students at Edison, I know I can help close to 34,000 students every single year.”

#### Calvin Moniz, Dist. 2

Calvin Moniz has been a District 2 resident for 15 years. He said he is running for a seat on the school board because he feels that public schools are the last chance for a great, equitable difference in society and the only opportunity for people to achieve their individual dreams. His approach to public education is to “treat students individually for who they are, appreciated for their differences.” His priorities are student safety, teaching STEM curriculum for real-world application without sacrificing an education in the arts, and extracurricular activities. He said it is important to ensure that students know all their options after graduation, including alternatives to the four-year university degree, such as trade schools and two-year colleges.

#### Sarah Smith, Dist. 6

Sarah Smith is a parent and community volunteer who has lived in District 6 for 10 years. Smith said she decided to run because she wasn’t happy with the previous board representative, and she became increasingly concerned with “attacks on Tulsa public schools last year.”

Smith said, “I believe every child deserves a quality public education, and I think they can get one, but we still have some work to do in Tulsa public schools. I’m a little concerned, too, about the drama and chaos that’s been going on with the board. Again, that’s why I want to make sure that District 6 is represented by somebody who is a parent and somebody who knows what’s going on in the schools and can take action.”

#### Teresa Pena, Dist. 5

Teresa Pena has been in her district for 54 years. A native of Tulsa and a lifelong educator, she also worked for Tulsa Public Schools for 35 years as a classroom teacher, an academic coordinator, a school design specialist, and a school administrator. She recently retired and decided to run after watching “the chaos” at the local and state education board levels. “Nobody seemed to be talking about the children.

“We are at a dire time when we must look at our education, our reading and our math and our science and social studies and get back to those basics. We need local control; we have to have a good school system. Because if we don’t have a good school system, now it will also go into our city. And we must have good workers, we must have good business owners, and we must be able to bring in different businesses to our community.

#### Maria Seidler, Dist. 6

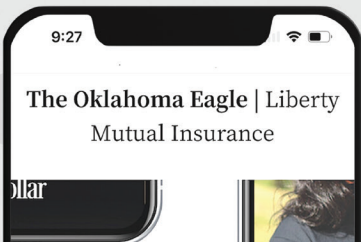
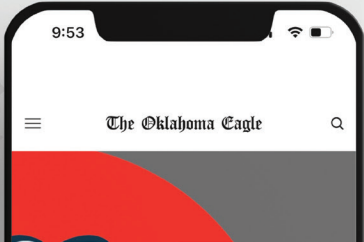
Maria Seidler is representing current board members E’Lena Ashley of District 4 and Jennettie Marshall of District 3 in a lawsuit accusing TPS and several other board members of violating the state’s Open Meeting Act, circumventing Board Policy, and manipulating board proceedings. The lawsuit seeks to invalidate Ebony Johnson’s appointment as TPS Superintendent and start a national search. The Oklahoma Eagle was unable to find any candidate information through an official candidate website or social media.

#### KanDee Washington, Dist. 2

KanDee Washington is listed on her Facebook page as a proud Booker T. Washington High School graduate, single mother and TPS Board District 2 candidate. She attended all District 2 schools: Springdale, Ellis Walker Woods, Marion Anderson, and Booker T. Washington. Her higher education includes Oklahoma State University. Tulsa Community College, Victory College and Columbia School of Broadcasting.

Washington’s professional career listings include C.F.S. Network Customer Service, Williams Communications Group (Threat/Release Analyst) and entrepreneur. She has been involved with the Oklahoma Education Association, Parents & Teachers Association, Families of Murdered Children, Women’s Empowerment, Metropolitan Tulsa Urban League Guild, John 3:16 and the Dream Center.

Washington’s platform states: “I’m on a mission, not a politician”, and lists her priorities as students first at school and in community; mental health help for all; site safety/security; eliminating worry; foster Engagement; boost Community Connections; all-around accountability.







ERICK HARRIS answers a question during a House District 39 special election debate hosted by NonDoc and streamed by News 9 on Wednesday, Jan. 31, 2024. PHOTO MICHAEL DUNCAN

Erick Harris Elected

# Erick Harris wins House District 39, EPS bonds pass

Joe Tomlinson  
NonDoc

House District 39 residents elected Republican Erick Harris to be their next state representative, and Edmond-area voters chose to issue \$147 million in bonds for district-wide improvements to Edmond Public Schools.

With all precincts reported, Harris earned 2,507 votes (50.37 percent) while Democrat Regan Raff and Libertarian Richard Prawdzienski received 2,246 (45.13 percent) and 224 votes (4.5 percent), respectively.

With the special general election falling on Feb. 13, the Oklahoma Legislature is in its second week of regular session. Harris will participate in the 2024 session and is expected to be sworn in quickly after results are certified by the State Election Board.

“I’m humbled to win this election and for the opportunity to serve the great citizens of Edmond in the state House,” Harris said Tuesday night in a statement. “Our state and nation face serious issues and I will work tirelessly every day to find solutions. I’m extremely grateful to my wife and supporters who worked hard to help me win this election. I also want to congratulate all of my opponents who ran spirited and passionate campaigns.”

Harris is the vice president for legal services at United Petroleum Transports. He served as an assistant attorney general from 2014 to 2016. Harris’s campaign website describes him as pro-life and a member of the National Rifle Association. It also states that he “will stand strongly against Joe Biden’s failed policies” and “rejects attempts to redefine gender.”

During a House District 39 debate hosted by NonDoc and News 9 on Jan. 31, Harris said he supported a 0.25 percent income tax rate reduction, encouraged State Superintendent Ryan Walters to use more “honey than vinegar” and explained the need for policy changes allowing married women facing domestic abuse to advance their court filings more quickly.

All results posted by the Oklahoma State Election Board online are unofficial until they are certified by the board.

## EPS bond proposals pass in landslide votes

EPS voters easily surpassed the 60 percent supermajority requirement for a pair of school bond proposals. Just shy of 80 percent of voters favored the two proposals, which each featured about 10,030 ballots cast.

The biggest items in the bond resolutions include \$30 million for construction of a new middle school and \$26 million for construction of a new elementary school — both on the southeast corner of Air Depot Boulevard and Covell Road.

Planning for growth in east Edmond, EPS paid \$3 million to acquire 80 acres on that property in May 2013. More recently, the district paid \$2.8 million for 80 acres at the northwest corner of Westminster Road and Covell Road in May 2022 for the construction of a fourth high school.

“We are grateful for the continued support of the Edmond community,” said EPS Superintendent Angela Grunewald in a statement Tuesday. “Tonight marks 62 consecutive bond issues that have passed in Edmond which highlights how much our community values public education. Our current and future students and staff members will greatly benefit from the results of today’s election.”

District leaders are planning for the elementary school to open in August 2026 and for the middle school to open in August 2027, said Jeff Bardach, EPS public information officer. However, the middle school will only include a sixth-grade wing and common areas after the first phase of construction. The district plans for the seventh- and eighth-grade additions, as well as athletic fields, to be funded by future bond elections.

Aside from the new middle and elementary school, 23 other items are listed on the bond resolution’s two proposals:

- \$18 million to improve Edmond Santa Fe High School to include but not be limited to the construction of a new freshman academy;
- \$14.25 million for technology, including but not limited to purchasing and installing computers, digital devices, computer software, technology related equipment, wireless networking equipment, phone systems, copiers, technology related support services, and transportation related technology equipment and software for student management purposes;
- \$11.7 million for school equipment, including but not limited to the purchasing of fine arts equipment and the purchasing of athletic equipment, as needed and as funds will allow at district high schools and middle schools, the purchase of child nutrition kitchen equipment, maintenance and school support vehicles and equipment as well as the purchase of library/media center books, software subscriptions, instructional

equipment, instructional and supplemental materials as needed and as funds will allow district-wide;

- \$8.67 million to improve HVAC units and related equipment;
- \$7.5 million to improve the baseball and softball fields at Edmond Memorial High School, Edmond North High School and Edmond Santa Fe High School;
- \$5 million to improve Scissortail Elementary School, including but not limited to construction of additional classrooms and certain building improvements;
- \$5 million for construction of additional classrooms at Scissortail Elementary School;
- \$3.5 million to construct, furnish or acquire and improve a facility to serve as a transition academy for special education;
- \$3.5 million to construct additional classrooms at Boulevard Academy, the district’s alternative education program;
- \$3 million to purchase new busses and other transportation equipment;
- \$2.5 million for improvements to Clergen Elementary School’s media center and security enhancements at the main entrance;
- \$2 million to improve the office area and certain restrooms at Orvis Risner Elementary School;
- \$1.5 million for renovations and improvements to classrooms at Charles Haskell Elementary School;
- \$1.4 million to provide for classroom furnishings district-wide as needed and as funds allow;
- \$1.4 million to construct and furnish a multi-use saferoom at the Edmond Early Childhood Center;
- \$1.4 million to renovate, replace, repair, and/or acquire roofing improvements district-wide;
- \$1.2 million for improvements to the existing media center at John Ross Elementary School;
- \$1.2 million to improve some existing classrooms at Sunset Elementary School;
- \$1 million to improve and upgrade security district-wide as needed and as funds allow throughout the school district to include but not be limited to the installation and upgrades of video surveillance camera systems, electronic security and door control devices,

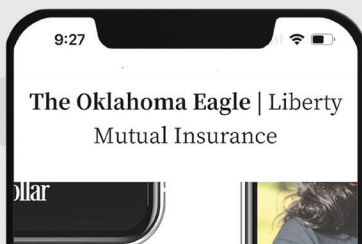
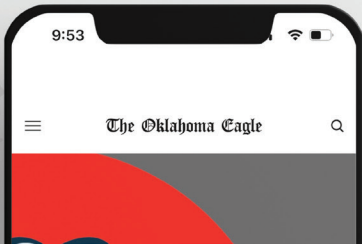
- fencing, badging and card reader systems;
- \$750,000 to improve and upgrade flooring district-wide;
- \$750,000 to improve and upgrade existing fluorescent lights to LED lights district-wide as needed and as funds allow;
- \$400,000 to renovate, construct, replace, repair, and/or acquire playgrounds and playground equipment district-wide as needed and as funds allow
- \$350,000 to improve the competition pool area used at the existing Mitch Park YMCA Aquatic Center to include but not be limited to HVAC, timing systems, and equipment.

JOSEPH TOMLINSON is a staff reporter who leads NonDoc’s Edmond Civic Reporting Project. A Report for America corps member, his coverage pertains to civics, politics and actions of the Edmond City Council, the Edmond Public Schools Board and other government bodies that affect area residents. Tomlinson graduated from the University of Oklahoma with a journalism degree in 2021. After covering Congress as a Gaylord News fellow, he completed an internship with NonDoc Media and became a staff reporter in 2022. Send tips and story ideas to joe@nondoc.com.

The Oklahoma Eagle

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





CLASSIFIEDS



Published in The Oklahoma Eagle:  
February 16 and 23, 2024

NOTICE TO BIDDERS  
SEALED BIDS FOR  
PROJECT NO. SP 23-2

Notice is hereby given that pursuant to an order by the Mayor of the City of Tulsa, Oklahoma, sealed bids will be received in the Westby Conference Room at Tulsa Performing Arts Center, 110 E 2nd St, Tulsa, OK 74103 until 2:00 p.m. the 15th day of March 2024 for furnishing all tools, materials and labor and performing the work necessary to be done in the construction of the following:

TULSA PERFORMING ARTS  
CENTER  
Project No. SP 23-2  
Package No. 1 and No. 2

A Pre-Bid Conference is scheduled for Monday February 26, 2024 at 10:00 a.m. at the Tulsa Performing Arts Center located at 110 E 2nd Street, Tulsa, Oklahoma, 74103. Meet at the third street main entrance.

Attendance at the Pre-Bid Conference is MANDATORY for GLAZING CONTRACTORS and AUDIO/VISUAL CONTRACTORS to submit a bid for this project.

Bids will be accepted by Lowry Construction Services, Inc. on behalf of the City of Tulsa.

Drawings, specifications and contract documents for construction of said public improvements may be obtained through Lowry Construction Services, Inc. via email request to [hutton@lowrycs.com](mailto:hutton@lowrycs.com)

Contract requirements shall include compliance as required by law pertaining to the practice of non-discrimination in employment.

Attention is called to Resolution No. 18145 of August 23, 1988, requiring bidders to commit to the goal of employing on the project at least fifty percent bona fide residents of the City of Tulsa and/or MSA in each employment classification.

Attention is called to Resolution 7404 of November 8, 2006, requiring bidders, their subcontractors and their lower-tier subcontractors to hire only citizens of the United States.

The City of Tulsa itself is exempt from the payment of any sales or use taxes.

A Certified or Cashier's Check or Bidders Surety Bond, in the sum of 5% of the amount of the bid will be required from each bidder to be retained as liquidated damages in the event the successful bidder fails, neglects or refuses to enter into said contract for the construction of said public improvements for said project and furnish the necessary bonds within thirty days from and after the date the award is made.

The bidder to whom a contract is awarded will be required to furnish public liability and workmen's compensation insurance, in conformity with the requirements of the proposed contract documents.

All bids will be opened and considered by the Bid Committee of said City project at a meeting of said Committee to be held in the Westby Conference Room at Tulsa Performing Arts Center at 2:00 p.m. the 15th day of March 2024.

Dated at Tulsa, Oklahoma, this 16th day of February, 2024.



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# THE OKLAHOMA EAGLE CHURCH DIRECTORY

**The Oklahoma Eagle publishes news and announcements for churches currently listed in *The Oklahoma Eagle's* Church Directory. For information, please call our office at (918) 582-7124**

## Church Of The Living God

1559 E Reading St. Tulsa OK  
(918) 584-3206

Minister RJ Smith

Sunday school - 9:30am  
Sunday Worship - 10:45am  
Monday Worship - 6:00pm  
Wednesday Bible Study - 5:00pm

## CAPERNAUM MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH

1962 N. Sheridan Rd.  
(918) 834-4747

Pastor Ruthie I. Howard

Sunday School  
10:00 a.m.  
Morning Worship  
11:00 a.m.

Bible Study & Prayer Wednesday 7:00 p.m.  
For Transportation (918) 402-6027

## Words of Wisdom Ministries FC

Temporarily meeting at the Courtyard Marriott 3340 S 79th E Ave Tulsa OK  
(918) 230-3022

Pastors Wesley & Alfie Gray would like to invite you to come and experience the Word of God in action this Sunday! God has a word for you, He Guarantee's it! You'll be glad you did!!!

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## GTOMi

Gospel Tabernacle Outreach Ministries, Inc.  
Traveling Outreach Ministries

609 E. Zion Street  
Tulsa, Oklahoma  
Elder Julius W. Bland  
Sr., Pastor  
918-810-3882

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## MOHAWK FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH

3329 E. 30th St. North • 834-0391

Sunday School  
9:30 a.m.

Sunday Morning  
Worship 11 a.m.

Bible Study  
Wednesday  
7 p.m.



Rev. Emanuel L. Collier, Sr.  
Pastor

## Gethsemane Baptist Church

727 East 56th St. North  
(918) 425-6613

Dr. W. T. Lauderdale

Sunday School  
9:00 a.m.

Church Services  
11:00 a.m.

## Zoe' Life Church of Tulsa

Rudisill Regional Library  
1520 N Hartford Ave.  
Tulsa OK 74106  
(918) 409-4899

Pastor Richard and Cher Lyons

Sunday Worship: 1pm  
Wed- Healing School: 6:30p - 8p

"The Righteous Are As Bold As A Lion." - Prov.28:1a

## SOLID ROCK 7th DAY BAPTIST CHURCH

123 E. 59th St. North  
Ph: (918) 425-2077

Pastor Rick Bruner

Sabbath School (Saturday)  
9:30-10:45 a.m.

Praise & Worship 11:00 a.m.  
Choir Rehearsal  
Wednesday 6:00 p.m.

"The Seventh Day Is Still God's Sabbath"

## Northside Christ Gospel Church

3101 N. M.L King Jr. Blvd.  
Tulsa OK  
(918) 625-2374

Sunday School - 10 am

Sunday Morning  
Worship - 10:45

Sunday Evening Prayer - 7 pm  
Sunday Worship - 7:30 pm  
Wednesday Prayer - 7:30 pm  
Wednesday worship - 8pm

Rev. John W. Anderson

## VERNON AME CHURCH

307-311 N. Greenwood Ave.

P: 918-587-1428

F: 918-587-0642

vernonamechurch@sbcglobal.net

Sunday  
Church School  
8:30 am

Worship Service  
10:00 am

Wednesday  
Bible Study  
6:00 pm



Rev. Dr. Robert R. Allen Turner

## FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH NORTH TULSA

THE CHURCH WHERE THE HOLY SPIRIT LEADS US



Pastor Anthony L. & Mrs. Kelly Scott

Sunday  
Sunday School - 9:30 a.m.  
Morning Worship - 11:00 a.m.

Wednesday  
Prayer Meeting - 6:30 p.m.  
Bible Study - Noon & 7:00 p.m.

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1301 S. Boston  
(918) 583-5181  
Rev. David Wiggs  
Senior Minister

Sunday Worship  
8:30 and 11:00 a.m.

Sunday School  
9:40 a.m.

Sunday TV  
Worship  
11:00 a.m.

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## TIMOTHY BAPTIST CHURCH

821 E. 46th St. N. • 425-8021

REV. TWAN T. JONES

Sunday School  
9:45 a.m.

Sunday Morning Worship  
11:00 a.m.

"We've come this far by faith"

## NORTH PEORIA CHURCH OF CHRIST

2247 N. Peoria  
Tulsa, Okla. 74106  
(918) 425-1071

Warren Blakney, Minister

Sunday Bible School.....9:00 a.m.  
Sunday Morning Worship.....10:00 a.m.  
Sunday Evening Worship.....6:00 p.m.

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## Pettie Chapel CME



19364 S. S. Mingo Road.  
Bixby, 74008

Phone: (918) 366-8870

Rev. Robert Givens

Sunday School 9:30 a.m.

Morning Worship 11:00 a.m.

"Where Peaceful Waters Flow"

## Church In Power

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Tulsa, OK 74106 - (918) 835-1525

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- 6:30 p.m.

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Children's Church, CIP Praise Dancers, and CIP Praise Tem.



Pastor Bukky and Wunmi Alabi

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**Mount Zion Baptist Church**  
419 N Elgin Tulsa, Oklahoma

Office:

918-584-0510

Fax:

918-584-1958

Prayer Line:

918-584-PRAY

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Morning

Worship 10:45

Wednesday

Bible Study

Noon and 7:00



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Tulsa, Okla., 74128  
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**BLACK FATHERS EMBRACE ROLE OF STAY-AT-HOME PARENT**  
Flexible work, rising childcare costs, and a desire to spend time with family created the conditions for Black men. **A17**



# The Road to Reparations



PHOTO THIAS SILVA ILLUSTRATION/NEW YORK AMSTERDAM NEWS

## Road to Reparations

**Belinda Royall, also known as Belinda Sutton,** proposed the first recorded case of reparations in the U.S. in 1783 as a pension payment.

## The fight for accountability continues

**Herb Boyd**  
Word In Black

When Michigan Rep. John Conyers (1929–2019) introduced HR 40 in 1988, the Commission to Study Reparation Proposals for African Americans Act, reparations gained perhaps its most significant public recognition.

This was by no means, however, the first time the idea of retribution for formerly enslaved African Americans had been proposed or demanded. Belinda Royall, also known as Belinda Sutton, proposed the first recorded case of reparations in the U.S. in 1783 as a pension payment. She was enslaved by the Royalls in Massachusetts when she petitioned for three years of back pension. The petition was granted, although it has been disputed as a legitimate challenge to bondage.

A little over a century later, in 1894, another Black woman, Callie House, along with the Rev. Isaiah Dickerson and other associates, began organizing the National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty and Pension Association, which was formally established by 1897. Her inspiration for reparations partly came from the failed promise of “Forty Acres and a Mule” at the close of the Civil War and from reading a pamphlet

entitled “Freedmen’s Pension Bill: A Plea for American Freedmen,” then circulating in Black communities.

She and Dickerson traveled across the ex-slave states, announcing their plan for restitution for former Black captives whose labor had been stolen from them, and recruiting followers. “We are organizing ourselves as a race of people who feel they have been wronged,” House declared upon co-founding the organization. “The association collected dues to help finance the lobbying effort and a lawsuit that was filed on behalf of those once held in slavery,” Johnita Scott-Obadele wrote in “Race and Resistance: African Americans in the 21st Century.”

“Instead of addressing in even a token way the past and ongoing injustices and crimes against Black people,” Scott-Obadele continued, “the various governmental entities spent about twenty years observing and investigating, finding that the leaders had committed no crime. In 1916, mail fraud charges were brought against Mrs. House, and she was convicted and sent to jail.”

A year before she was convicted, the first known reparations lawsuit, *Johnson v. MacAdoo*, was filed, according to Charles Ogletree (1952–2023) in his book “All Deliberate Speed.” “In Johnson, the plaintiff, Cornelius J. Johnson, sued the

Cont. A16

## SCOTUS, Race, Schools

### SCOTUS Punts on Race and Schools Case

Despite dismantling affirmative action, the court declined to hear a case on the admissions policy at an elite high school.

**Joseph Williams**  
Word In Black

Less than a year after the Supreme Court voided race-based admissions policies in top colleges, diversity advocates breathed a sigh of relief when the high court passed on hearing a challenge to an initiative to bring more Black students to an elite Virginia magnet school.

But experts warn that the court’s decision not to hear a challenge to an admissions policy at Thomas Jefferson High School in suburban Washington, D.C., is more likely the justices deciding to hit the pause button on a politically charged issue — not a clear win for diversity in secondary education.

The court apparently “is not ready to opine on such a question” so soon after its landmark 2023 ruling, says Deborah Hellman, a constitutional law professor at the University of Virginia School of Law. While it’s hard to read the court’s motives, she says, “I think (the court) will be for some time.”

Cont. A16



Road to Reparations



PHOTO THIAS SILVA  
ILLUSTRATION/NEW YORK  
AMSTERDAM NEWS

From A15

U.S. Department of Treasury, claiming the government’s taxation of raw cotton produced by slave labor constituted an unjust enrichment from the labor of African Americans. The D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled against him, concluding that the government was immune from suit on sovereign immunity grounds.”

In 1963, the indomitable Audley “Queen Mother” Moore (1898–1997) proposed reparations to members of the National Emancipation Proclamation Centennial Observance Committee (NEPCOC) conference in Philadelphia. She called on her audience to “demand reparations for the injuries inflicted upon them by the dominant white nation.” As Ogletree noted, “She was able to gather over one million signatures from citizens supporting this demand; even more remarkably, she managed to present the signatures to President Kennedy, along with the demand.” She would continue to promote the crusade for reparations at the Black National Convention in Gary, Indiana, in 1972.

A dramatic event in the reparations movement occurred on May 4, 1969, when James Forman (1928–2005), former chair of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), interrupted worship at New York City’s Riverside Church with a largely white congregation and presented the Black Manifesto, demanding \$500 million from U.S. churches and synagogues for reparations. He said the money would support a southern land bank, four television networks, and a university. Many of the components of the manifesto had been determined weeks earlier in Detroit at the National Black Economic Development Conference (NBEDC).

“Actually, BEDC received less than \$300,000 in reparations by the summer of 1970,” Forman wrote in his book “The Making of Black Revolutionaries.” He said most of the

money was funneled to other organizations, and “most of the funds they retained...were invested in a revolutionary publishing house called Black Star Publications.”

During the late 1960s, there was a proliferation of Black Nationalist formations, including the National Black United Front, Republic of New Afrika, and Black Workers Congress, each espousing some form of reparations. Several of the more prominent and militant organizations were founded in Detroit, where there was a coterie of passionate activists advocating for reparations: The Rev. JoAnn Watson (1951–2023) and Detroit activist Ray Jenkins (aka “Reparations Ray”) are among the most vocal leaders. It was often suggested that they created the groundswell that put reparations high on Conyers’s agenda. Of course, by the time the Michigan politician became involved, other influences were at play, particularly the passing of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 in support of Japanese Americans who were forced to live in internment camps.

Each surviving Japanese American internee was awarded \$20,000 in compensation, with payments beginning in 1990. According to the legislation, their internment was based on “race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership” as opposed to legitimate security reasons; more than 82,000 received redress checks.

The success of Japanese Americans was a source of inspiration for many in the African American reparations movement, believing they were next in line for restitution. Around the time Japanese Americans were celebrating their achievement, the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparation in America (N’COBRA) was formed and held its first town meeting in Washington, D.C., by 1989.

“Members of the organization discussed a draft bill calling for reparations, prepared by Congressman John Conyers, with the congressman’s staff,” Scott-Obadele wrote. “The bill, titled ‘A Commission to Study

Reparations Proposals for African Americans Act’ and assigned the number H.R. 3745, was first introduced in the House of Representatives in the 101st Congress, November 2, 1989.” It should be noted that this particular bill did not call for reparations. This is the bill that Conyers would issue and see tabled each year until his death.

By the 21st century, the reparations movement was hardly noticed, given the scourge of police brutality against Black Americans. But among the stalwarts joining Conyers would be Randall Robinson (1941–2023) and his cohort at the TransAfrica Forum, most notably Danny Glover and Bill Fletcher. Robinson’s book “The Debt” gave the reparations movement the treatise it required to open up a new century of struggle and impetus. All it needed now was a living plaintiff to provide the ballast demanded by the court.

Once more, Ogletree was equal to the task, along with Johnnie Cochran (1937–2005). The Tulsa Massacre of 1921 would be the gambit, especially with two elderly witnesses and victims of the incident ready to testify. As Ogletree put it in his book, “Despite compelling evidence that Black Tulsa residents were entitled to receive reparations for their loss of life and property, their claims were largely ignored. All we needed were clients.”

Ogletree’s team found 60 survivors of the Tulsa Massacre who were willing to sign onto a lawsuit. They all agreed that the incident could advance the case for Jim Crow reparations. Buttressing the team was attorney Michael Hausfeld, who successfully represented Holocaust victims in lawsuits against Germany and other European nations.

Assembling a cadre of clients, forging a support committee of outstanding scholars and activists, and an incomparable legal team were to no avail. Judge James Ellison of the United States District Court for the Northern District of Oklahoma denied the plaintiffs’ claim, even as he validated the appropriateness of the

lawsuit.

“What can we say about courts that admit that the state of Oklahoma and the city of Tulsa helped to destroy an entire community and kill its citizenry but announce that the survivors cannot seek legal redress?” Ogletree asked at the close of his chapter on reparations. “What can we say about laws that would enable the perpetrators of atrocities to escape liability by destroying evidence and denying legal remedies? Is it possible that we still have two standards of justice in America: one for victims of domestic terror perpetrated by individuals and one for victims of domestic terror perpetrated by the state? Is it possible that we still have different standards of justice depending on the race of the victims? If there can be no justice for the victims of the Tulsa Race Riot, there may be little hope for justice in America.”

The Oklahoma lawsuit disappointed Ogletree and his team, but other cities and states have waged campaigns on reparations and restorative compensation. No matter the dismal outcome in Tulsa, Ogletree envisioned a promising new development in the struggle for reparations, citing the dedication of Chicago Alderwoman Dorothy Tillman. She worked closely with former Mayor Harold Washington and, by 2005, had introduced an ordinance ensuring that corporations that do business in Chicago disclose their prior connection to slavery. Almost immediately, her ordinance began to bear fruit when JPMorgan was forced to admit that two banks affiliated with them had served as banks to plantations and thereby helped facilitate the slave trade.

Over the last several years, there have been some astonishing breakthroughs. In the fight for reparations and in part two of our series, we will explore the modern-day struggle to turn the dream of reparations into a reality. □



PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

SCOTUS, Race, Schools

VA school temporarily spared court’s scrutiny

From A15

On Tuesday, the justices declined to add to their upcoming docket a case arguing that the admissions policies for the prestigious Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology in Fairfax, Va., discriminate against Asian American applicants.

The highly-anticipated case, Coalition for T.J. vs. Fairfax County School Board, was brought by a group of Asian American parents who argued that the strategies the school implemented to increase the number of Black and Latino students left their children out in the cold.

Although the conservative-majority court agreed to punt the case, Justice Samuel Alito wrote a 10-page dissent slamming the “indefensible” decision. He said a lower court ruling that now stands is “based on a patently incorrect and dangerous understanding of what a plaintiff must show to prove intentional race discrimination.”

The reasoning behind that ruling, Alito wrote, is “a virus that may spread if not promptly eliminated.”

At issue is a series of changes the high school made in the wake of the 2020 murder of George Floyd, when the country underwent a racial reckoning. The school board made what it called “holistic” changes to Thomas Jefferson High’s admissions requirements — including priority admission for the top 1.5% of eighth-grade students in the county’s public middle schools, elimination of the entrance exam, and waiver of a \$100 fee.

The changes triggered an increase of nearly 1,000 more applicants, including substantial upticks in the acceptance of Black and Hispanic

students. But Coalition for T.J. sued in federal court, and a federal district judge sided with them in 2022.

But in a 2-1 decision, an appellate court overturned that decision last year. In its ruling, the court noted that, even after the changes, Asian American students made up more than half of those who received offers of admission. White students made up 22% of the admission pool, with Latino students at 11% and Black students at less than 8%.

Hellman, the University of Virginia professor, says that although the Supreme Court’s dismantling of affirmative action in college admissions was a backdrop, the facts and issues raised in the Thomas Jefferson High School case are different, and that may have given pause to the justices.

In the college admissions case, race was an explicit factor in deciding who won admission to Harvard University and the University of North Carolina, Hellman says. But Thomas Jefferson, she says, adopted “a facially race-neutral policy. The new policy was one that didn’t use race-based classification.”

Though they lost at the Supreme Court, lawyers for Coalition for T.J. say they haven’t given up on trying to change the admissions policy at the high school.

“If anything, this multiplies our efforts,” Glenn Roper, a senior attorney for the Pacific Legal Foundation, which represented the plaintiffs, told Inside Higher Ed. “There are multiple unanswered questions from the Students for Fair Admissions ruling that the court is going to have to address eventually.”

JOSEPH WILLIAMS, a veteran journalist, political analyst, and essayist, has been published in a wide range of publications, including The New York Times, The Washington Post, Politico, The Boston Globe, The Atlantic, and US News & World Report. A California native, Williams is a graduate of the University Of Richmond and a former Nieman Fellow at Harvard University. He lives and works in metro Washington, D.C.



Black Fathers

# Black Fathers Embrace the Role of Stay-at-Home Parent

Bria Overs  
Word In Black

In a demonstration of engagement and support in education, thousands of fathers and male figures across more than 100 cities in 31 states accompanied their children to school last September. They showed up and showed out to signify the importance of fathers and their presence in all aspects of their children’s lives.

The event, called The Million Fathers March, brought out an estimated 64,8000 participants, according to Fathers Incorporated, an Atlanta-based non-profit supporting fathers through services and programming.

What demographic had the largest turnout that late summer day? Black men, Kenneth Braswell, CEO of Fathers Incorporated, says.

“If you stand outside of any low-income school in this country, including D.C., and you watch the cars that come around to drop off children, I guarantee you the vast majority of people that you will see dropping off children will be Black men,” Braswell tells Word In Black.

Parenthood looks different from years past. Importantly, who stays home and who does not has also changed.

Nearly a quarter of children under 15 with married parents have a stay-at-home mother, while 1% have a stay-at-home father, according to November 2023 data from the U.S. Census Bureau. Regardless of marital status, dads now represent 18% of all stay-at-home parents, a Pew Research Center analysis found, up from 11% in 1989.

Some are retired or in school, others are unable to find work. A majority of men today said they took on this role in their families because they are ill or disabled. They also increasingly said they wanted to take care of their homes and families.

White men make up a larger share of stay-at-home dads at 50% of the group, followed by 21% of Hispanic fathers. Black fathers “are a larger share of stay-at-home dads than they are of working dads.”

## Why Black Men Are Staying Home

An increase in stay-at-home dads, especially among Black men, does not surprise Braswell. A decade ago, research from the U.S. Centers

Nearly a quarter of children under 15 with married parents have a stay-at-home mother, while 1% have a stay-at-home father, according to November 2023 data from the U.S. Census Bureau.



PHOTO: ADOLPHUS

for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found Black fathers were most likely, at 70%, to “have bathed, dressed, diapered, or helped their children use the toilet every day,” compared with white and Hispanic fathers.

He says flexible schedules, thanks to entrepreneurial endeavors, the availability of part-time work, the gig economy, and remote work, allow dads to show up and be more engaged. But this is only one aspect.

The rising cost of childcare is likely pushing more parents, across genders, to stay home. In 2021, 17% of Black children under 5 lived with a family member who had to quit, change, or refuse a job because of issues with child care, according to a report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

William M. Rodgers III, vice president and director of the Institute for Economic Equity at the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, says wages and non-labor income are two main factors behind the decision to work. Like Black women, Black men also face a wage gap, earning 80% of the median earnings of white men.

“Maybe they decide to stay home because the wage offer they’re getting is not high enough to induce them to want to work,” Rodgers says. “It could be that they have other sources of income. If they’re married, it may be that their wife is garnering a higher wage.”

Empowerment and smashing glass ceilings by women could be another contributor, Braswell says, as well as embracing the idea of nurturing from men, which is positive for families and the economy.

THE MILLION FATHERS MARCH

The Million Fathers March (MFM) is an opportunity for dads, uncles, grandfathers, coaches, mentors, clergy, men’s groups and organizations to show their commitment to the educational lives of their children throughout the school year by escorting children to school on this day.

“You’re not only growing productivity by investing in creating good young people who are going to be more productive,” Rodgers says. “These early childhood investments, particularly Head Start, if sustained, have longer lasting positive impacts.” □



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Bank of America  
Invests In Tulsa  
Nonprofits

More Than \$480,000 Contributed  
To 14 Organizations In 2023

Dr. Jerry Goodwin  
The Oklahoma Eagle

Bank of America contributed more than \$480,000 to a variety of local nonprofit organizations. One of the world’s leading financial institutions has formed a longstanding commitment to supporting economic opportunity in the communities that it serves. The bank said the philanthropic grants and sponsorships were given to 14 nonprofits. The nonprofits were identified for their efforts to bolster economic mobility and financial stability and increase access to educational,

food, and health resources in the city. One of the charities benefitting from a Bank of America grant through the bank’s Neighborhood Champions program was City Year Tulsa. The program provides funding and leadership training to nonprofits working to improve the livelihood of individuals in underserved neighborhoods. The grant will enable City Year to devote more resources toward improving learning environments and

facilitating healthy relationships with students to achieve equity in education. Nonprofit organizations play an important role in the success and well-being of the Tulsa community,” said Bill Lissau, president, Bank of America Tulsa. “At Bank of America, we believe that it is our responsibility to support these efforts that address the barriers within our community and create a lasting impact on the lives of our neighbors and families we

serve.” Additional nonprofits receiving a grant in 2023 were the following: Assistance League of Tulsa, City Year Tulsa, Family and Children’s Services, Grand Lake Mental Health Center Inc., Iron Gate Inc., John 3:16 Mission, Junior Achievement of Oklahoma Inc., Mental Health Association Oklahoma, Murrow Indian Children’s Home, New Workforce Direction Inc., ONABEN, Resonance Center for Women Inc., Salvation Army, and the University of Oklahoma Foundation Inc. The employees of Bank of America Tulsa were recently recognized as the top volunteer team in the country and achieved a record-breaking 95% participation rate in volunteer events in 2022. As a result, the local bank employees received the Bank of America 2023 Global Volunteer Award. Leading the local volunteer efforts for the bank were Rick Pieper with Business Banking, Michelle King with Preferred Banking, and Mary Burchett with the CFO Group. In a press release, the bank said, “This year’s efforts reflect the bank’s dedication to addressing inequities and barriers to success by partnering with local organizations that support basic needs and create opportunities to build job skills, establish financial stability and promote healthy lifestyles to help people achieve success for themselves and for future generations.”

Central High School Competes In Debate Competition



Dr. Jerry Goodwin  
The Oklahoma Eagle

The Central High School Debate Team participated in the Union High School Forensic Invitational Tournament. The team received 11 awards at the competition. “In preparing for the competition, the students memorized lines, developed characters, conducted research, and worked very hard to compete in all categories. Students

rehearsed daily in and out of the classroom to portray positive outcomes,” said Dr. Rodney Clark, chair of the Fine Arts Department and the debate coach. Clark is also a speech and drama coach and teacher. Students participating in the competition were (front row, l-r) Essence Faulk, Kenzie Hemmesch, Nailah Williams, Jayden Heaven,

and De-Je Ne’ Sanders and (back row, l-r) Briell Jones, Shanyah Roby, Jay’Lynn Davison, Dr. Rodney Clark, Raquel Reese, Alana Williams, Zayana Tillman, and Isaiah Jordan. Additionally, Essence Faulk, Kenzie Hemmesch, and Jacari Watson contributed to the debate team.

12th Annual Union Forensic Society Invitational Tournament Central High School Awards		Event Date/Place
		January 26-27, 2024 Tulsa, Oklahoma
Ranking	Award	
1st Place	Jay’Lynn Davison Isaiah Jordan Isaiah Jordan & Raquel Reese* Shanyah Roby	Monologue Poetry Chumps Dramatic Duet Praise
2nd Place	Briell Jones Shanyah Roby & Cadence Owens De-Je Ne’ Sanders and Alana Williams Zayana Tillman	Dramatic Interpretation Policy Debate Dramatic Duet Monologue
3rd Place	Nailah Williams Central High School Debate Team	Novice Dramatic Interpretation Overall Award in 4A Stereotypes
4th Place	Jayden Heaven**	Domestic Extemporaneous Speaking

THE CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL DEBATE TEAM receives nearly a dozen awards at the Union High School Forensic Invitational Tournament.  
PHOTO PROVIDED

Events

February  
Black History Month

**Feb. 23**  
National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) is hosting its monthly support group for family members, significant others, and friends of people with mental health conditions at St. Augustine Catholic Church, Education Center, 1720 E. Apache St., 6 p.m. – 7:30 p.m. The meetings are held on the fourth Monday of each month. For more information, call (918) 587-2965 or contact staugustineparishtulsaok@yahoo.com.

**Mar. 13**  
2024 Greenwood Women’s Business Center InnovateHER Women’s Summit at the Doubletree Warren Place, 6110 S. Yale Ave. The program is sponsored by the Greenwood Women’s Business Center, 102 N. Greenwood Ave., Suite 201, 10 a.m. -3 p.m. For more information, contact info@greenwoodwbc.com or gbcwomensummit.com.

**Mar. 27**  
Women’s History Month – “And So I Stayed” will be shown at Tulsa Community College at its VanTrease Performing Arts Center for Education (PACE), 103000 E. 81st St., on March 27 from 6 p.m. – 8 p.m. The film is an award-winning documentary by Natalie Patillo and Daniel A. Nelson about survivors of abuse fighting for their lives and spending years behind bars. This is the story of how the legal system gets domestic violence wrong, according to a press release about the film. The program is sponsored by the T. Oscar Chappelle Family and the TCC Foundation. For more information, contact ramona.curtis@tulsacc.edu.

**Apr. 12-13**  
National Association of Black Journalists Region III conference, Tulsa, Okla. Eleven states, including Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas, will be represented. For more information, contact Eva Coleman, Region III director, at evacolemannabj@gmail.com.

**Sep. 15-22**  
Pärå Citywide Creative Festival sponsored by the J’Pärå Artist Group, Inc.

Jack and Jill Celebrates Founders’ Day



JACK AND JILL TULSA CHAPTER recognizes Founders’ Day program on Jan. 28. PHOTO PROVIDED

Dr. Jerry Goodwin  
The Oklahoma Eagle

Jack and Jill Tulsa Chapter commemorated the founding of the local chapter in 1946. The chapter held a Founders’ Day program that featured food and fellowship. The agenda for the day included a program featuring “We Welcome,” “We Remember,” “We Reflect,” “We Honor,” and “We Celebrate” topics. Recognizing the occasion were (front row, l-r)

Michelle Gentry Anderson, Angela Hardman, Kim Michell, Trayce Love-Chandler, and Melody Phillips, and (back row, l-r) Kim Williams, Brandi Cannon, Kenya Carter, Trinity Price, Erica Townsend-Bell, Charlyn Terry, Regina Baker, and Jameca Price. The local chapter officers are Nicole Travis, president; Erica Townsend-Bell, vice president; Brandi Cannon, program director; Kimberly Williams, recording secretary; Nikki Carter, corresponding secretary and chaplain; Nichole Newton, treasurer; Leslie Walters, financial

secretary; and Janice Connolly, editor. Jack and Jill of America, founded in 1938, is a membership organization of mothers, with children ages 2-19, dedicated to nurturing future African American leaders by strengthening children through leadership development, volunteer service, philanthropic giving, and civic duty. The 262 chapters across the country represent more than 50,000 family members. For more information, contact jackandjilltulsa@gmail.com or visit https://www.jackandjillinc.org/chapter/tulsa/