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FEATURED

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Gossip conviction,
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new trial**

Gossip Conviction, A6



FEATURED

**Neighbors Object to
Youth Homeless Shelter
Expansion**

Homeless Shelter, A8

DR. JENNETTIE MARSHALL

Tulsa Public Schools, Board Member, District 3

Ms. Marshall has a strong history of serving people through her ministerial duties, funeral service duties, and volunteer work. Jennettie retired from the State of Oklahoma where she worked for the Department of Corrections and the Department of Human Services. She also served the City of Tulsa as a police and fire chaplain and was trained in emergency disaster response and hostage negotiation.



Dr. Jennettie Marshall, Tulsa Public Schools board member, district 3.

PHOTO PROVIDED

State Audit Reveals Massive Mismanagement of Funds at TPS

TPS
John Neal
The Oklahoma Eagle

On Feb. 26 Oklahoma State Auditor and Inspector Cindy Byrd released a long-awaited state audit of Tulsa Public Schools, and it documented a wide range of financial irregularities, including bonus payments made to TPS employees by the TPS Foundation that bypassed school board authorization.

Cont. A3, TPS

E'LENA ASHLEY

Tulsa Public Schools, Board Member, District 4

Ms. Ashley was elected to her post in April 2022. Her term will expire in April 2026. E'Lena Ashley is a veteran of the US Army who served her country overseas in US Army Military Intelligence and domestically as an advocate for Veterans Affairs in Washington, DC. Ms. Ashley knows the importance of research, advocacy, and leadership in driving improved outcomes.



E'Lena Ashley, Tulsa Public Schools board member, district 4.

PHOTO PROVIDED

A board that seemed uninterested in pursuing keen oversight of financial transactions

FROM A2

TPS

The 45-page report also gave details about the defrauding of TPS of more than \$800,000 by former Chief Talent and Learning Officer Devin Fletcher. Fletcher was later criminally convicted and ordered to pay restitution.

The comprehensive review of TPS's finances dates to July 2022, when Tulsa Public School Board members Jennettie Marshall and E'Lena Ashley requested that the state audit the TPS district. Their request was considered unusual and controversial, mainly because it required action from an unlikely ally — Gov. Kevin Stitt.

Marshall and Ashley, both African American, had long been critical of financial information provided to the school board, frequently complaining at board meetings of incompleteness or lack of transparency. At the time, the two were viewed as outliers in a board that seemed uninterested in pursuing keen oversight of financial transactions made by

Audit Report dozens of examples of individual financial transactions that circumvented board purchasing policies or violated proper accounting practices.

TPS officials.

But during a meeting in the summer of 2022, then TPS Superintendent Deborah Gist told the board that tens of thousands of school district dollars had gone missing. That startling revelation in turn prompted TPS Marshall and Ashley to make the forensic audit request. The investigation of the missing funds eventually resulted in a former high-ranking school official's criminal conviction. It would be two and a half years after the initial audit request that Byrd revealed the audit findings.

The audit period was from 2015 to 2023. More than 1,400 financial discrepancies were found over the eight years. Besides the defrauding and bonus payments, some of the more salient findings in the audit were the following:

- A systemic lack of internal controls and administration over the purchasing process.
- Invoices to TPS frequently lacked proper authorization or proof of actual costs, were insufficiently itemized, or lacked explanatory detail.

- Board policies had been violated or circumvented in some purchasing processes.

Digging deeper

The audit report provided dozens of examples of individual financial transactions that circumvented board purchasing policies or violated proper accounting practices, reflecting a lack of appropriate financial administration and internal controls. The section of the report that details these transactions is the most protracted and wide-ranging.

A careful examination of the examples reveals that most of the financial discrepancies occurred in the early to mid-term of the Gist administration from FY 2018 to FY 2020. Gist resigned in August 2023. The school board appointed Dr. Ebony Johnson permanent TPS Superintendent in December 2023.

The report makes this observation about the current administration concerning the purchasing process discrepancies. "The District has acknowledged its noncompliance with purchasing policies and laws. Steps have been taken to review and improve these

Cont. A5, TPS

The Oklahoma Eagle

Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher: 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.

The Oklahoma Historical Society is an agency of the government of Oklahoma dedicated to promotion and preservation of Oklahoma's history and its people by collecting, interpreting, and disseminating knowledge and artifacts of Oklahoma.

Ada Sipuel Fisher signing the register of attorneys, 1952 (21412.M65712, Z. P. Meyers/Barney Hillerman Photographic Collection, OHS).

Featured Last Week



Bills Proposed In OKC Could Affect Child Caregiver Wages And More



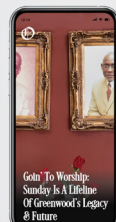
Billie Parker: A Steady Force for Celebrating African American Heritage



In dispute over O'Brien decision, beef brews between Kunzweiler, Nichols

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FROM A3

TPS

processes. Guidance memos have been issued to steer the corrective process."

The report several times assigns some of the blame to the TPS School Board for insufficient oversight. However, the report did not specify the actions the board failed to take or recommend any board policy changes. It suggests that the "board should oversee and approve these efforts to enhance purchasing policy compliance and ensure the future effectiveness of related policies and procedures."

Extensive Fraud Revealed

While the State Auditor's report found many irregularities in the purchasing and payment processes over the eight years under review, only one set of transactions resulted in a diversion of funds constituting "fraud". But it was massive.

The case was first identified in June 2022. At that time, the Gist administration thought the loss of TPS funds was less than \$20,000 and accepted the resignation of one employee.

However, over the following weeks and months, Byrd, working with local and federal law enforcement officials, found that the transactions and schemes were much more extensive and involved multiple vendors and individuals. In the end, according to the report, \$824,503 were diverted from TPS and the Foundation for Tulsa Schools.

The report identifies Fletcher, former Chief Talent And Learning Officer, as the perpetrator of the fraudulent scheme. The procedure that he created involved paying false or padded invoices to five vendors, primarily for alleged consulting services. The report identifies five other TPS executives as "also approving invoices or payments."

In October 2023, Fletcher pled guilty to conspiracy to commit wire fraud. He was sentenced to 30 months in prison and was ordered to pay over \$600,000 in restitution. Gov. Stitt has asked the Oklahoma Attorney General to investigate whether other charges should be brought. Days after the report was released, TPS board members Marshall and Ashley called for a thorough review of the district's policies and possible further investigations and actions.

John Neal
The Oklahoma Eagle

ILLUSTRATION
The Oklahoma Eagle

The Oklahoma State Board of Education to reconsider the accreditation meeting. The denial came on a 3-2 vote with Warning" action in place.



John Neal
The Oklahoma Eagle

ILLUSTRATION
The Oklahoma Eagle

Tulsa Public Schools opened Aug. 18 already faced with major issue: A shortage of 100 teachers.
George Washington Carver Middle School, Booker T Washington High School and other schools in North Tulsa are among the 78 schools and charter partners across the city that are struggling to fill vacancies. The shortfall includes some positions that are critical to core content instruction.
Tulsa Superintendent Deborah Gist described the situation at a recent Board of Education meeting as at "catastrophic proportions."
In an interview with The Oklahoma Eagle, Gist blamed the vacancies on inadequate funding for schools by the state Legislature.

Deborah Gist, former Tulsa Public Schools superintendent.

ILLUSTRATION THE OKLAHOMA EAGLE

HB 1775 violations

Gov. Stitt expanded the scope of the audit request to go beyond Marshall and Ashley's request and include TPS compliance with controversial state law HB 1775. The Oklahoma Eagle has reported extensively on HB 1775, signed into law in 2021, and its intended efforts to suppress the truthful teaching of Black history and racial bias training. Tulsa Public Schools' accreditation was downgraded in 2022 for an alleged violation of the statute, but it bolstered court efforts to overturn the law. (See <https://theokeagle.com/2022/09/03/tulsa-public-schools-case-bolsters-legal-efforts-against-racially-discriminatory-law/>) Stitt's request of the State Auditor was to determine if TPS had committed additional violations.

Stitt also asked the auditor to determine if TPS "may have conducted a training," referring

to HB 1775, "which banned the teaching of critical race theory." HB 1775 makes no reference to "critical race theory." The law bans the use of eight "concepts." Following a review of TPS training documents, primarily obtained by vendors, the auditor report states, "...the full extent of TPS's compliance [with HB 1775] was undeterminable."

The auditor does not mention that while the audit was underway, a federal District Judge had issued an injunction order halting the enforcement of key provisions of HB 1775 as reported by The Oklahoma Eagle in July 2024. (See <https://theokeagle.com/2024/07/01/judge-rules-educators-may-teach-racial-history/>)

DEI probe

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs seek to safeguard the treatment of minorities from

recruitment and application through retention and promotion in employment, education, and other social or economic arenas. They arose in the wake of racially motivated violence, particularly George Floyd's murder.

As previously reported in The Oklahoma Eagle, a September 2021 survey found that "More than eight in ten (83%) of the 656 responding organizations say they have taken action on DEI initiatives in 2021, a 13-percentage point increase from 2020."

Since that time, there has been an intense backlash against the program. (See <https://theokeagle.com/2024/02/17/minority-opportunity-program-facing-elimination/>) In December 2023, Gov. Kevin Stitt issued an Executive Order prohibiting DEI programs in state universities and agencies. However, neither HB 1775 nor state administrative rules ban DEI programs in public

schools.

Nevertheless, in an apparent effort to suppress DEI programs, the Oklahoma State Department of Education issued an order requiring school districts to report "DEI-related expenditures" made during the 2022-2023 school year. Superintendent Gist responded by saying there were no such expenditures.

In her audit report, Byrd investigated the TPS response.

As informed by the OSDE order, Byrd broke the analysis into individual "concepts of diversity, equity, and inclusion." Byrd found that "TPS implemented equity principles by redistributing resources among schools... and incorporating this equity-based ideology in teaching and learning practices." She concluded that "TPS did not correctly report all DEI related expenditures."

TPS response

Tulsa Public Schools provided The Oklahoma Eagle with its initial response to the audit's findings and a report on changes being made in the district's financial administration. While the district broadly agrees on areas that need improvement, it continues to seek clarification on some of the state audit findings and challenges others.

In a statement, Ebony Johnson, TPS superintendent, stated that "most of the items we have already addressed during the two-and-a-half-year course of the audit." Johnson added, "we've taken bold action with real-time oversight, instituted strong monitoring systems to ensure adherence to policy and procedures, and mandated new protocols that streamline verifications and approvals."

TPS further provided a list of actions taken before receiving the audit and a 14-page report responding to the initial State Auditor and Inspector findings. In a press conference held just days after the audit report's release, TPS Board members Marshall and Ashley vowed to continue to press for vigorous corrective actions and more robust district board oversight.

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 director when the city won multiple awards for its planning accomplishments. He is now retired and resides in Austin, Texas.



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(ABOVE) **Richard Glossip.** The U.S. Supreme Court vacated Oklahoma death row inmate Richard Glossip's conviction in a 5-3 ruling Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025.
PHOTO **NONDOC**

(LEFT) **United States Supreme Court.** Panorama of the west facade of United States Supreme Court Building at dusk in Washington, D.C., United States of America.
PHOTO **WIKIMEDIA COMMONS**

SCOTUS throws out Glossip conviction; prosecutors to decide on new trial

Glossip Conviction
Matt Patterson
NonDoc

In a 5-3 decision the United States Supreme Court vacated the conviction of Oklahoma death row inmate Richard Glossip today and remanded it for consideration of a new trial after the State of Oklahoma admitted to prosecutorial misconduct.

Chief Justice John Roberts, Justices Elena Kagan, Brett Kavanaugh, Ketanji Brown Jackson, and Sonia Sotomayor voted to vacate Glossip's murder conviction for the slaying of motel owner Barry Van Treese, writing that "the prosecution violated its constitutional obligation to correct false testimony." Justice Amy Coney Barrett wrote her own opinion, partially agreeing with the majority but stopping short of vacating Glossip's conviction. Justice Neil Gorsuch did not participate.

Glossip's case has traveled a long and winding road. Two years ago, justices spared Glossip from execution pending the resolution of his appeal. Oklahoma Attorney General Gentner Drummond argued for clemency for Glossip in front of the state's Pardon and Parole Board in August 2023. Drummond, who is now a candidate for governor, told the board he believed Glossip was guilty of being an accessory to murder after the fact, and may very well have murdered Van Treese, but the quality of the 2004 trial and questions that have arisen since then make the death penalty excessive. That board ultimately denied Drummond's request.

"My position from the beginning is that I'm troubled by this issue, but I would confirm

that I believe Mr. Glossip is, in fact, guilty of at least accessory after the fact," Drummond told the board in August 2023. "More likely than not, he's guilty of murder. But I don't believe that the evidence presents he is guilty beyond a reasonable doubt, and that is my concern. I believe that when we view the cumulative nature of the facts, I have reached the difficult decision that the state cannot proceed in confidence with the conviction that would result in the death penalty.

"I believe this board should support a recommendation of clemency based on the complete record that includes evidence the jury did not hear. I believe it is a great injustice to allow the execution of a man whose trial was plagued by many errors."

In 1997, Glossip was initially charged with accessory to murder following the killing of Van Treese, who was Glossip's boss at the time. Justin Sneed, one of Glossip's coworkers, later confessed to beating Van Treese to death and received a sentence of life without the possibility of parole after telling prosecutors that Glossip had hired him to commit the murder.

Glossip was eventually charged with first-degree murder and sentenced to death in 1998. The Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals

overturned that conviction for ineffective assistance of counsel, but Glossip was convicted and sentenced to death again at a 2004 retrial.

One of Van Treese's children, Derek, released a statement Tuesday afternoon requesting a third trial for Glossip, who he said "is undeniably guilty of first-degree murder."

"For the last 10,276 days, we've been waiting for justice for the murder of Barry Van Treese. The U.S. Supreme Court has concluded that one small bit of impeachment evidence should have been presented at Glossip's trial and has remanded for a new trial. Both previous Oklahoma juries made it clear that the issue at hand isn't one of guilt or innocence — Glossip is undeniably guilty of first degree murder. The burning issue here and now is of process and procedure," Derek Van Treese said. "While it may be difficult to start fresh on a 28-year-old case, I urge the attorney general and the Oklahoma County District Attorney's Office to demonstrate the same perseverance that our family has shown throughout this process. We pray that they exhibit the fortitude to take politics out of the equation and process this case as the death penalty case it is, and not take the easy road of a lesser

Cont. A7, **Glossip Conviction**



(ABOVE) **Gentner Drummond**, Oklahoma Attorney General. PHOTO OKLAHOMA.GOV

(LEFT) **Best Budget Inn** in Oklahoma City, where Barry Van Treese was murdered. PHOTO PROVIDED

Van Treese family remains confident that retrial will yield the same verdict, guilty

FROM A6

Glossip Conviction

charge. If they find that they are not up to the task, and unable to shoulder the burden, they should recuse themselves and allow someone with the aptitude and skill necessary to prosecute this case so it can finally be laid to rest, once and for all.

“The family remains confident that when that new trial is held, the jury will return the same verdict as in the first two trials: guilty of first degree murder.”

Drummond, who argued before the Supreme Court that Glossip’s conviction should be vacated, praised Tuesday’s ruling.

“Our justice system is greatly diminished when an individual is convicted without a fair trial, but today we can celebrate that a great injustice has been swept away,” Drummond said in a statement. “I am pleased the high court has validated my grave concerns with how this prosecution was handled, and I am thankful we now have a fresh opportunity to see that justice is done.”

Drummond argued that prosecutors had notes indicating that Sneed had a diagnosed mental health disorder and that they failed to correct misinformation or disclose credibility

“Our justice system is greatly diminished when an individual is convicted without a fair trial .”

Gentner Drummond, Oklahoma Attorney General

concerns with Sneed’s testimony at trial. The majority of the court agreed with that assessment.

“Here, Oklahoma’s attorney general joins Glossip in asserting a Napue error, conceding that Sneed’s testimony about his lithium prescription was false and that the prosecution knowingly failed to correct it,” justices wrote. “The record supports that confession of error. Evidence showed that Sneed was prescribed lithium to treat bipolar disorder, not after asking for cold medicine as he claimed at trial. The evidence likewise establishes that the prosecution knew Sneed’s testimony was false. The prosecution almost certainly had access to Sneed’s medical file through Sneed’s competency evaluation. And (prosecutor Connie) Smothermon’s notes show that she had a pre-trial conversation with Sneed at which he mentioned ‘lithium’ and ‘Dr. Trumpet.’ The straightforward inference is that Smothermon was aware before trial that Sneed had received his lithium prescription from Dr. Trombka, a psychiatrist and the sole medical professional at the Oklahoma County jail authorized to prescribe lithium.”

Lea Glossip told the Associated Press that she and her husband found out about the decision at the same time.

“Rich and I opened the decision together on the phone this morning, knowing it would be a life-changing moment,” she said. “To say that we are overcome with emotion is an understatement. We are deeply grateful. Today is truly an answered prayer.”

In a statement, Oklahoma County District Attorney Vicki Behenna said she will work with Drummond to determine whether Glossip should be tried for a third time. Previously, she indicated that Glossip’s case would not be pursued as a death penalty case if she were prosecuting it today.

“This morning, I had initial conversations with Attorney General Gentner Drummond regarding today’s Supreme Court decision on the Richard Glossip case,” Behenna said. “I will review the entire opinion and at that time will discuss next steps together with the attorney general.”

Oklahoma Coalition Against the Death Penalty chairman The Rev. Don Heath praised the SCOTUS ruling.

“This is wonderful news,” he said. “The US Supreme Court is still capable of doing the right thing. Congratulations to Richard and Lea Glossip. Hopefully their suffering is at an end. Congratulations to Glossip’s legal team for this amazing result.”

Richard Eugene Glossip (born February 9, 1963) is an American prisoner who was on death row for over two decades at Oklahoma State Penitentiary after being convicted of commissioning the 1997 murder of Barry Van Treese. The man who murdered Van Treese, Justin Sneed (age 19 when he committed the crime), had a “meth habit” and agreed to plead guilty in exchange for testifying against Glossip. Sneed received a life sentence without parole.

Board of Education Approves Controversial Social Studies Standards

Social Studies

Jennifer Palmer
Oklahoma Watch

The Board of Education on Thursday advanced new academic standards for social studies that would require public schools to teach the Bible.

Academic standards outline what students are expected to learn in each grade and subject, but they don’t dictate how teachers teach or mandate any specific curriculum. In Oklahoma, they are revisited on a six-year cycle that aligns with textbook adoption. The Legislature must approve the final version.

Superintendent of Public Instruction Ryan Walters has pushed the state’s public schools to teach the Bible as a historical resource.

Mentions of Christianity and the Bible appear more than 40 times and for students as young as first grade in the revised social studies standards. That’s compared to one time in the current iteration.

For example, second-grade teachers would be expected to instruct students to “identify stories from Christianity that influenced the American colonists, founders, and culture, including the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth.

By a 5-1 vote, the board approved the new version. They considered delaying the vote to give the three new members, Ryan Deatherage, Michael Tinney and Chris

VanDenhende, appointed this month, more time to review the information. Walters urged them to proceed.

More than 30 organizations, churches and religious leaders signed a letter opposing the standards and urging the Board of Education to reject them.

“After careful review of the draft academic standards for social studies, we believe that the representation of religious, spiritual, ethical, and nonreligious traditions and communities within the standards improperly and erroneously privileges Christianity,” they wrote.

Several conservative pundits were appointed by Walters to oversee the process. They included radio host and PragerU founder Dennis Prager, conservative talk show host Steve Deace, Kevin Roberts, president of the Heritage Foundation, and Texan David Barton, an activist working to overturn church-state separation through his nonprofit, WallBuilders.

The board also approved new science standards.

The Legislature must also approve new standards.



The Oklahoma Board of Education meets on Feb. 27, 2025. PHOTO JENNIFER PALMER/OKLAHOMA WATCH

Jennifer Palmer has been a reporter with Oklahoma Watch since 2016 and covers education. Contact her at (405) 761-0093 or jpalmer@oklahomawatch.org. Follow her on Twitter @jpalmerOKC.



PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

Neighbors Object to Youth Homeless Shelter Expansion

Homeless Shelter

Heather Warlick
Oklahoma Watch

When Isaac, a young Oklahoma City man, was 7 years old, he and his mother moved from Las Vegas to Oklahoma City. Just two years later, Isaac's mother died.

He never met his father. His grandparents took him in, but when he turned 18, they kicked him out, he said.

He tried to live in rentals, but he was fighting addiction and couldn't find stability.

Now 21, Isaac has a long scar on the side of his neck, a reminder of being attacked with a knife last fall. Being young and homeless is scary, he said.

During these formative years, Isaac has found refuge at Sisu Youth Services, an emergency shelter for homeless youth ages 15 to 24.

"Sisu is my safe place," he said.

One of few shelters for homeless youth in the state, Sisu serves as a temporary home to between 20 and 35 young Oklahomans experiencing homelessness.

But the shelter is experiencing growing pains. A group of crime-conscious neighbors are campaigning to derail the shelter's plan to grow the facility.

Sisu has petitioned the local city council to approve SPUD-1694, a zoning change that will allow Sisu to expand its facility onto the vacant lot next door. The shelter's blueprint includes space for more specialized service providers on-site and six rooms for youth with babies.

Concerned neighbors say the shelter's young clients are engaging in dangerous and illegal behavior

around the Shepherd and Sequoyah neighborhoods, particularly at Swatek Park.

Shepherd neighborhood resident Sarah Ashmore emailed Oklahoma Watch in January stating that neighbors have seen and captured on video young adults from the shelter engaged in various offensive behaviors.

"Imagine coming home from work to find people sitting on your front porch and blocking your entrance into your own home," she wrote. "Imagine stepping outside your door to find an active fist fight on your front lawn that ends in a stabbing."

She cited people blasting profane rap music, yelling curse words and racial slurs, brandishing weapons and more.

She said she and other neighbors have complained to the city to no avail. Ashmore's husband, Chaz Farrell, has become involved with a group of about 30 neighbors from Shepherd, Sequoyah and Military Park neighborhoods who hope to make the area safer.

Farrell said he witnessed several incidents involving shelter clients, when his toddler was playing with gardening tools in the dirt under the swings at Swatek Park.

"She was digging under the slide in the playground, and we found syringes, like dirty syringes," Farrell said. "Since then, we've probably found half a dozen more."

Farrell said he once saw a youth pull a knife on an older woman when she asked them to turn down their

music. And once, he said, he took his daughter out to ride her bike when, out of the blue, someone started shouting profanities and threatening to kill them.

Farrell said he and other neighbors feel like they're being gaslighted when they report these incidents and nothing is done. After the bike riding incident, Farrell said police never responded to his call for assistance.

Farrell and Ashmore said they want the city council to nix the zoning request, saying they already don't feel safe in their neighborhood. Ashmore said expanding the shelter will only drive more traffic to the area.

During their January meeting, members of the Oklahoma City Planning Commission debated the rezoning request and allowed public comments.

"We're talking about people being threatened with weapons, we're talking about people being harassed, we're finding used syringes in our park, (people are having) public sex in the broad daylight," Ashmore said at the meeting. "There's a lot of stuff going on that's not just innocuous."

Ashmore said she wants accountability from Sisu and a decline in incidents with the homeless youth before the zoning change is approved.

The planning commission passed the rezoning request, which will be voted on by the full Oklahoma City City Council on March 11.

An Inner-City Problem

Rachel Bradley, executive director of Sisu Youth Services, said she doesn't

deny some of her young clients may engage in unsavory behavior when not on shelter property. But she thinks many of the serious allegations from neighbors may be committed by homeless adults who also frequent the area.

"We are in an inner-city neighborhood, so you're going to have people experiencing homelessness in your area, whether they're teenagers or not," Bradley told Oklahoma Watch.

A data request to the Oklahoma City Police Department returned 259 police calls to the Sisu shelter starting in July, 2023 when the shelter relocated to its current building, a former church on NW 30 near Pennsylvania Ave in Oklahoma City.

Of the police calls, 192 were listed as valid calls with no report made.

"Some of the things that the neighbors bring up is that there are a ton of police calls to Sisu," Bradley said. "We've tried to explain to them that calls do not equal crime."

Some of the calls, she said, originated from Sisu youth themselves who needed police assistance. Or when a runaway shows up at the shelter, Sisu works with the police to reunite the youth with their families.

Of the 27 times police have visited Sisu this year through Feb. 21, five resulted in police reports: two were runaway juvenile calls, two were hotline transfers and one was an attempted suicide.

An additional 10 disturbance calls and 12 similar calls did not result in police reports.

Cont. A9, Homeless Shelter

State Data Reveals 26,000 Students Documented As Homeless

FROM AS

Homeless Shelter

One call was for armed robbery, but no report was made. One was a found-child incident that resulted in an arrest.

“And so our interactions with those law enforcement partners are varied, and I think that that’s kind of just tough for some people to understand how many different situations happen that law enforcement is involved with,” Bradley said.

Oklahoma Youth are Homeless in the Shadows

The youth sheltered at Sisu represent a greater problem of homelessness among Oklahoma’s youth.

According to school-sourced data, more than 26,000 Oklahoma public school students were documented as homeless in 2024. That’s up more than 2,000 from 2023.

According to Positive Tomorrows, an Oklahoma City school that serves homeless students, 21% of the students the schools serves were couch homeless upon enrollment for the 2023-2024 school year. Another 62% stayed in homeless shelters. To qualify as homeless, students were documented as lacking a fixed, regular and adequate



PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

nighttime residence.

This data is collected as part of the McKinney-Vento Act, which allows school districts to collect additional funding to make extra accommodations to ensure homeless students get to school.

Nationally, in 2024, more than one of every four people experiencing homelessness was a child under 18 or a young adult between the ages of 18 and 24.

While most of these students likely are accompanied by a parent, some are unaccompanied youth like Isaac, whose parents are absent or have died.

These homeless students are not typically counted in local Point in Time surveys because PIT counts only include people sleeping outside and in shelters – families and unaccompanied minors usually double up with friends or family members.

Services tailored to homeless youth are few and far between in Oklahoma and youth experiencing homelessness are less likely to seek services and shelter, said Beth Edwards Svetlic, assistant executive director of Youth Services of Tulsa.

They’re less likely than adults to seek services, she said.

“Navigating some of those systems is super complex, and so they often just don’t,” Edwards Svetlic said. “Just tracking down a birth certificate or a Social Security card from a guardian who maybe isn’t accessible can create enormous barriers for some of our young people.”

Youth Services of Tulsa owns five apartment complexes, where half are leased at market rates and half are used for rapid rehousing of homeless youth.

Edwards Svetlic said the program aims to create “a more typical and normal living environment for young people, so they can practice things like how to be a good neighbor and navigate some of those challenges of being a neighbor and building community and things like that.”

Sisu has a similar rapid rehousing program with apartment sites rented to at-risk youth.

Despite their concerns, Ashmore and Farrell said they care about the homeless youth and support the shelter, even if it is in



Isaac is a homeless 21 year-old who stays at Sisu Youth Services. PHOTO HEATHER WARLICK/OKLAHOMA WATCH

Heather Warlick is a reporter covering evictions, housing and homelessness. Contact her at (405) 226-1915 or hwarlick@oklahomawatch.org.

their neighborhood.

“I think most all of us neighbors who have complaints are supportive of their mission,” Ashmore said. “We don’t want to see anyone suffering with homelessness and would like to see everyone get the support that they need.”

“I just think that we need to make sure that we’re doing it in a safe way,” she said.

Whether or not the city council approves the rezoning request, Sisu will carry on serving homeless youth.

If the request is approved, Sisu will create

a courtyard effect by fencing in three sides of the property, with the main building providing street access.

Bradley said she hopes that will help keep her clients from roaming the neighborhoods while easing concerns among the shelter’s housed neighbors.

Heather Warlick is a reporter covering evictions, housing and homelessness. Contact her at (405) 226-1915 or hwarlick@oklahomawatch.org.

Education Department Seeks to Buy Bible Lessons for Elementary Kids

Bibles

Jennifer Palmer
Oklahoma Watch

While its effort to buy Bibles for classrooms is tied up in court, the Oklahoma Department of Education initiated a new vendor search to purchase materials containing Bible-infused character lessons for elementary-aged students.

The department is looking to buy supplemental instructional materials containing age-appropriate biblical content that demonstrates how biblical figures influenced the United States. Additionally, the materials must emphasize virtues, significant historical events, and key figures throughout Oklahoma history, according to bid documents published Friday.

The request for proposals doesn’t specify how many copies the state wants to buy, only that the vendor must be willing to ship directly to districts.

Like the Bibles the department sought in the fall, this request could be challenged under the state constitution, which prohibits public money from being spent for religious purposes.

“This RFP seems to be another constitutional violation,” said Alex Luchenitser, an attorney for Americans United for Separation of Church and State and one of the attorneys representing Oklahomans in the Bible lawsuit.

“It seeks to inject the Bible into public school curricula and only refers to the Bible and doesn’t refer to any other religious texts, so it’s clearly a move to push Christianity,” he said.

The Education Department wants the character materials to align with Oklahoma’s new social studies standards, which have been revised to contain more than 40 references to the Bible and Christianity, compared to two in the current version. But the proposed standards haven’t been approved.

Superintendent of Public Instruction Ryan Walters presented the social studies standards to the Board of Education at its next meeting on Feb. 27. The board approved the standards.

The standards review committee included several nationally prominent conservatives: Dennis Prager of PragerU, David Barton of the Christian Nationalist organization Wallbuilders, and the president of the

“

This RFP seems to be another constitutional violation. It seeks to inject the Bible into public school curricula and only refers to the Bible and doesn’t refer to any other religious texts, so it’s clearly a move to push Christianity.

Alex Luchenitser,
attorney for Americans
United for Separation of
Church and State.



PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

Heritage Foundation, Kevin Roberts.

While standards guide what schools are to teach, school districts have sole authority to choose curriculum and books.

In November, the state abruptly canceled a search to buy 55,000 King James Bibles, an effort that attracted criticism for appearing to exclude all Bibles except an expensive version endorsed by President Donald Trump.

Walters vowed to reissue that request, but a coalition of parents, students, teachers and faith leaders asked the Oklahoma State

Supreme Court to block the purchase and Walters’ mandate to teach the Bible.

The Office of Management and Enterprise Services, the state’s central purchasing agency, also wants to wait. It asked the court for an order allowing it to delay the new Bible request for proposals until the case is resolved. Two OMES employees are named in the lawsuit.

Jennifer Palmer has been a reporter with Oklahoma Watch since 2016 and covers education. Contact her at (405) 761-0093 or jpalmer@oklahomawatch.org. Follow her on Twitter @jpalmerOKC.



PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

Stitt Replaces Board of Education Members

Ed Board
Jennifer Palmer
Oklahoma Watch

Gov. Kevin Stitt on Tuesday abruptly replaced three members of the Board of Education in what he called a shake up to better focus the board on student outcomes.

Superintendent of Public Instruction Ryan Walters fired back the next day by appointing two of the ousted board members to a new committee, which he said will provide DOGE-style oversight (referring to the Department of Government Efficiency, led by billionaire Elon Musk.) Walters, on X, claimed the board members had been “fired for political purposes.”

Citing negative headlines and disappointing scores on the Nation’s Report Card, Stitt said in a written statement the board needed to refocus as the state’s education infrastruc-

ture had “fallen prey to needless political drama.” Board members haven’t cast a single no vote during Walters’ two years in office.

On Wednesday, Stitt said he disagreed with Walters’ proposed administrative rule requiring schools to ask for the immigration status of students and their parents. He said it amounted to using children as political pawns.

Stitt nominated to the board Ryan Deatherage, of Kingfisher; Michael Tinney, of Norman; and Chris VanDenhende, of Tulsa. Nominees must be confirmed by the Senate but can serve in the interim.

They join board members Zachary Archer and Sarah Lepak. One seat remains vacant, but Stitt is expected to name that appointee

in the coming weeks. The board is scheduled to meet next on February 27.

Stitt removed board members Kendra Wesson, of Norman; Katie Quebedeaux, of Guymon; and Donald Burdick, of Tulsa. Each voted in favor of the immigration rule at last month’s board meeting; Archer and Lepak didn’t attend.

Walters on Wednesday named Wesson and Quebedeaux co-chairs of the Trump Advisory Committee, which is tasked with taking the schools back from the U.S. Department of Education and fighting the “liberal DC swamp that has now leaked into Oklahoma’s executive branch,” according to Walters’ statement.

Jennifer Palmer
has been a reporter with Oklahoma Watch since 2016 and covers education. Contact her at (405) 761-0093 or jpalmer@oklahomawatch.org. Follow her on Twitter @jpalmerOKC.



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FEATURED

What Now? Huey Newton's 55-Year-Old Vision for a Party in Crisis

Newton, A13



FEATURED

Title I Funding in Limbo: What's at Stake for Black Students

Black Students, A15



PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

National Blackout Day(s) Flex Black Economic Power, Fight

Blackout
Aswad Walker
Word In Black

On Feb. 28, National Blackout Day seeks to demonstrate Black economic power via boycotts of anti-DEI companies.

Black consumers and their allies plan to make a national statement with their dollars.

On Friday, Feb. 28, a National Blackout Day is planned. During this day, individuals nationwide will protest companies that they contend are disrespecting Black people and others negatively impacted by the companies Amazon, Target, Walmart, McDonald's and others that have chosen to end their DEI initiatives.

"This is a nationwide Blackout just to demonstrate the economic power from our community to show that you're not going to play in our face," said Dr. Otis Moss III, pastor of Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ, the former church home of President Barack Obama.

What Is the Blackout

Reverend Al Sharpton, founder of the National Action Network, was one of

the national leaders who called for this "Blackout." The assignment for participants is to refrain from making any purchases online or in-store from businesses that aren't verified Black-owned.

A communication issued by Sharpton also reads, "No Amazon. No Walmart. No Best Buy. No McDonald's and other fast food stores... No gas. No major retailers. Do not use credit or debit cards for non-essential spending... If you must spend, only support small local businesses."

Several companies had previously sworn to commitments of conscience and values to push DEI efforts in the wake of the 2020 murder of George Floyd. However, with President Donald Trump's declaration to end all DEI efforts, several corporations chose to moonwalk away from those pro-DEI decisions of conscience and values.

National Blackout Day is a response

Cont. A14, Blackout

What Now? Huey Newton's 55-Year-Old Vision for a Party in Crisis

Newton
Dorien Paul Blythers
Word In Black

Huey saw the potential for solidarity among various groups in 1970, and the Democrats have a similar opportunity. Will they take it?

Just over a month since the new president took the oath of office, I, like

Cont. A14, Newton



PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

FROM A13

Blackout

from U.S. consumers who feel played by corporations. But truth be told, several businesses that ended their DEI efforts, Target and Walmart included, are already feeling the heat of huge sales drop-offs, worrying shareholders.

Though many Black people are interpreting the Blackout as a Blacks-only effort, there are countless individuals and organizations of other races and ethnicities who have signed on and are leading the call for participation in their communities.

Interestingly, but probably not surprisingly, since over 90% of local news stations are owned by highly conservative and right-wing, pre-coverage of the event has been somewhere between dismissive and outright negative.

Still, some stations are taking a more respectful approach to coverage of the effort.

And before the scheduled Feb. 18 National Blackout, Pastor Jamal Bryant called for a 40-day fast from Target.

The Message

National Blackout Day participants seek to ensure those corporations get the message if they haven't already.

"I'm participating because we live in a society that only responds when their money is threatened," said Houstonian Dola Young. "Furthermore, a Blackout day is an indication that we are serious and willing to go further than one day. Lesson learned from the Montgomery Bus boycott."

"I'm participating as a show of unity with the Black community who this current administration and several white corporations are disrespecting and actively harming with their anti-DEI vilification," said Dr. Jawanza Clark. "They are choosing white mediocrity over a celebration of the greatness that is embracing our racial and gender diversity."

Ft. Bend County resident DeeDee LaShore said, "Outside of our actual vote, this is the only power we actually have and can exercise freely, at this point, so, participating is a must."

Additional Day

Though National Blackout Day is scheduled

National Blackout Day participants seek to ensure those corporations get the message if they haven't already.



Aswad Walker

I'm originally from Cincinnati. I'm a husband and father to six children. I'm an associate pastor for the Shrine of Black Madonna (Houston). I am a lecturer (adjunct professor) in the University of Houston Main Campus's African American Studies Department and have done that since 2004, teaching "The Black Church in America," "Black Liberation Theology."

for Friday, Feb. 28, depending on who you talk to, this protest is actually slated for two days.

Moss is calling his congregation and others "who believe in the idea of a flourishing democracy" to use Feb. 27 and 28 to send a message.

"Do not place your dollars with any corporate entity on the 27th and the 28th. If you need to fill up your car with gas, you need to do it on the 26th," Moss said on Feb. 25. "Only purchase Black-owned and local."

Moss's congregation is being asked to extend the boycott on both days, but especially on Feb. 28.

"Do not utilize social media on the 28th. Now, I know that's going to be like a withdrawal symptom for those who are addicted to it. But it is Silicon Valley, from the Jeff Bezos to the Mark Zuckerbergs to the Peter Thiels, who are financing what we are seeing across this nation," said Moss.

He pointed out that when people go on social media, those companies (Meta, Twitter, etc) track users to determine the algorithms that dictate the information they're fed.

"But if we are not utilizing it they will see a downturn in usage," added Moss, who suggested using the phone to call people as an alternative to social media.

Moss, whose church, along with hundreds of others, started their boycott of Target, Walmart and Starbucks specifically weeks ago, said "Target has seen a revolt of its shareholders."

"[Target] shareholders want a specific meeting with the board of directors because it has affected their shares. [They have] plummeted as a result of what's been happening," said Moss. "The second bit of news is that Walmart witnessed the lowest returns that it has seen in over a year since this has been announced."

Newton: A Modern Call To Unite In Revolutionary Fashion

FROM A13

Newton

many others, found myself chronically doomscrolling my iPhone as if it were a permanent appendage.

I consumed headlines, hot takes, and half-assed attempts at post-mortem election analysis. I wanted to be inspired, to parse through my own jaded, inconclusive rabbit-hole summaries — from the perspective of someone who lived deep in the bowels of the Democratic Party for the past five months. Between the sweetest moments of scrolling TikTok in its "final days," I stumbled upon the timely and prescient words of Huey P. Newton.

Fresh out of prison after serving time for a contested manslaughter conviction, Huey was reasserting his leadership at a moment of deep internal crisis for the Black Panther Party. In a New York City address given in the summer of 1970, To the Revolutionary Brothers and Sisters, he declared: "During the past few years, strong movements have developed among women and homosexuals seeking their liberation."

And with stunning courage, he proclaimed: "We should try to unite with them in a revolutionary fashion."

Spoken to a Black Panther Party fracturing from the inside out — over ideological divides, regionalism, sexism within its ranks, and financial turmoil — Huey's prescription for an ailing party appears to have (at least) a 55-year-old shelf life.

A Leadership Vacuum

A few hours of feeding input-hungry social media algorithms expose the wide range of sentiments among Democratic voters — fatigue, bitterness, despondency, and in some cases, anger. Former Twitter refugees, armed with their moral convictions, are finding bluer pastures for their short-form opinions on Bluesky. Self-appointed political pundits spar under clickbait memes and headlines from urban blogs on Instagram. The political chaos is in full swing, but party leaders are either silent, sidelined, or struggling to command the moment. The circus is open for business, and the ringmaster is nowhere to be found.

That perspective is widely shared. Many are looking to the hills for leadership — the Invisible Negro Justice League expected to appear from thin air. What is Hakeem Jeffries doing? Where is Kamala? Can't Obama do something? These questions, misguided or not, reveal an unsettling truth: the American leadership vacuum is being felt at every level.

Perhaps there's an early lesson to be gleaned from Huey's nearly two-year absence from Panther Party leadership before his murder conviction was overturned. Can the Democrats prove that electing a straight, white, male chairman, Ken Martin, is not a rebuke of the recent cycles of tribal-laden identity politics as strategy? Some see it as an about-face — a signal to the fiercely loyal 92-percenters, Black women, who remain the irrefutable conscience of the party. With just two years before the next federal election, this party in crisis, too, must consider its own breaking point.

In Huey's speech, his call to "unite in revolutionary fashion" with others "seeking their liberation" was not just rhetorical — it was prophetic.

By 1973, the Black Panther Party and the Gay Liberation Front had forged real alliances, sharing hard-fought victories

in opposing police violence, advocating for prison reform, and expanding public health services, including sexual and reproductive healthcare for women and LGBTQ+ people — laying the groundwork for future HIV/AIDS activism in the Black community. These were not symbolic gestures but tangible protections at a time when the government offered little. Sound familiar?

While the Black Panther Party of the '70s and the Democratic Party of today may seem like distant strangers, their histories provide a grim warning to us all. It's difficult to ignore the parallels between COINTELPRO — the FBI's counterintelligence program that wielded disinformation, surveillance, infiltration, and direct violence against the Black Panther Party — and a Trump administration that has promised retribution against its political enemies. And while external forces have sought to dismantle and discredit party systems, in both cases, we see intra-party fighting as just as capable of slowing progress.

Despite financial headwinds and deeply divided leadership, Huey Newton offered a bold, audacious path forward — one that centered on harnessing the strength of "other" movements where common ground was within reach. If Huey saw the potential for solidarity among marginalized groups in 1970, today's landscape offers a similar opportunity — one that the Democratic Party cannot afford to ignore.

The others of today, those forced to the margins and now preparing for battle, are not so different from those of the past. They are living in the margins, lacing up their gloves for a fighting chance.

Standing at a Crossroads

I would project that those fighting for the dignity of transgender Americans would lock arms on the frontlines with immigrants and Dreamers fighting to stay in the communities they've called home. I would imagine the coalition would create space for the poor working class and those duped into believing that a billionaire class looting the American treasury has their best interests at heart. I would consider the plight of farmers and farmworkers, milling about a crop of spoiled fruit that government leaders promised would bear good returns — only to be sacrificed to petty tariff battles. In the face of authoritarianism, those whose lives and dignity are in the crosshairs might join forces to build a more formidable opposition and be an insurmountable target.

Historians remind us that the Black Panther Party disbanded just over a decade later, undone by internal fissures, shifting missions, and financial insolvency. But today, we stand at a similar crossroads, and our response will determine our fate. I would submit to my fellow doomscrollers that we may evade that eventual demise.

It would require #NeverTrumpers and protest voters, lesser-of-two-evilers, progressives, Blue Dogs, abolitionists, and yes, even the revolutionaries among us, to shed the narrow inclinations of self-preservation to inch one step closer to salvation for us all.

If we take a page from Huey's vision, a modern coalition — united not by political convenience but by shared survival — could emerge.

That is where the path forward begins for a party in crisis.

Title I Funding in Limbo:

A Baltimore judge has temporarily blocked Trump's DEI ban, but experts warn that federal funding may still be at risk.



PHOTOS ADOBE IMAGES

Black Students

Quintessa Williams
Word In Black

For decades, Title I funding has been a financial backbone for schools serving low-income and predominantly Black students, helping pay for things like after-school tutoring. But now, those funds are in legal limbo, caught in a political fight over race, education, and federal control.

Earlier this month, the U.S. Department of Education issued a directive giving schools two weeks to eliminate DEI programs or risk losing billions in federal funding. The order has triggered immediate backlash from education and civil rights groups.

Late last week, a federal judge in Baltimore temporarily blocked it, putting enforcement of the executive order on hold — for now — and leaving schools in a state of uncertainty.

"It's a form of domestic terrorism," says Dr. Aaron Pallas, a professor of sociology and education at Teachers College, Columbia University. "If the goal has been to sow chaos and administer as much pain as possible, this executive order has been doing just that."

What's at Stake for Black Students?

Established in 1965 as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty Act, Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is particularly directed at school districts and schools with concentrations of children who, unfortunately, often live below the poverty line, Pallas explains. "It's one of the rare instances where there's bipartisan support for federal involvement in education because it directly benefits the most vulnerable students."

Today, Title I provides over \$18 billion annually to schools serving predominantly low-income students, a disproportionate number of whom are Black. According to the latest data from the National Center for Education Statistics, 37% of Black students attended high-poverty public schools

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The puzzling thing right now is figuring out how much backbone Republican members of Congress are going to have in standing up against some of these cuts, especially if they hit their own constituents.

Dr. Aaron Pallas, a professor of sociology and education at Teachers College, Columbia University

compared to 7% of white students.

Title I funding helps level the playing field by assisting schools in reducing class sizes and implementing teacher retention programs, providing tutoring for struggling students, and paying for after-school and summer learning programs. It also helps low-income districts afford special education and mental health services.

If Title I funding is revoked or delayed, the consequences for Black students could be devastating and wide-ranging. These include eliminating academic support programs, leading to increased learning gaps; teacher shortages, resulting in overcrowded classrooms in underfunded schools; a loss of critical resources like school counselors and social workers; and a widening funding gap between wealthy and low-income districts.

In addition, losing Title I programs could hurt Republican-led states that depend on federal dollars for education the most. National Education Policy Center data shows that solidly red states, like Mississippi, Louisiana, and Tennessee, rely on money from Washington for a large portion of their K-12 budgets.

Yet, despite the potential fallout, Pallas says many Republican lawmakers have remained silent.

"The puzzling thing right now is figuring out how much backbone Republican members of Congress are going to have in standing up against some of these cuts, especially if they hit their own constituents," Pallas notes. "That's worrisome because we're not seeing as much resistance as I hoped for at this point."

A Political Power Play Designed to Instill Fear

Not long after taking office, President Donald Trump signed an executive order claiming that school DEI programs promote division and suppress merit-based education policies. Under the directive, schools that refuse to eliminate DEI initiatives — including teacher training programs on racial bias, equity-focused hiring practices, and culturally responsive curriculum — risk losing federal

dollars.

The threat left many school districts scrambling to comply. However, Dr. Pallas believes the administration is testing its limits; it will take a lot of undoing of statutes, he says, to make Trump's order a reality.

"The order was designed to inspire fear," Pallas says. "Many institutions were terrified that all these funds they've relied on would disappear. The fear is so great that some schools have already begun scrubbing websites or pausing diversity-related initiatives. It did, I think, propel some institutions to act sooner than they needed to."

Pallas says the executive branch has very "limited power" because only Congress, which authorizes Title I funding, can end it. However, the White House can slow-walk funding, which could cause significant disruptions ahead of the upcoming school year.

"The executive branch can delay disbursement of congressionally authorized funds, but it generally has not had the ability to cancel them," he says. "However, most school budgets depend on a predictable funding stream, and when that's disrupted, it creates enormous challenges for districts that serve the highest-need students."

What's Next?

As legal battles continue to unfold, the potential impact on Title I hangs in the balance.

"I think the worst would be the executive order winding its way up to the Supreme Court, and (the court) concluding that the president has the power to do this," says Pallas. "I don't know where they will land on this particular issue. But I'm hoping that having their authority questioned will piss them off and cause them to push back."

Still, Pallas says it's important that everyone keep advocacy alive.

"The most important thing is to organize and give a collective voice," he says. "Voices that are pointed together are stronger than individual voices."

Title I

Title I ("Title One"), which is a provision of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act passed in 1965, is a program created by the U.S. Department of Education to distribute funding to schools and school districts with a high percentage of students from low-income families, with the intention to create programs that will better children who have special needs that, without funding, could not be properly supported. Funding is distributed first to state educational agencies (SEAs) which then allocate funds to local educational agencies (LEAs) which in turn disburse funds to public schools in need. Title I also helps children from families that have migrated to the United States and youth from intervention programs who are neglected or at risk of abuse.





Dr. Ken L. Harris is the president and CEO of the National Business League. He is the sixteenth individual to serve in this role.

PHOTO PROVIDED

National Business League Marks 125th Anniversary With Major Announcement

DR. JERRY GOODWIN
The Oklahoma Eagle

NBL Reaffirms Commitment To Black Economic Freedom After DEI Dismantle; Launches Global Movement To Digitize One Million Black Businesses

The National Business League (NBL), founded by Booker T. Washington in 1900, has launched its 125th anniversary initiative. For its quasiquintennial year, NBL aims to digitize one million Black Business Enterprises (BBEs)® by 2028. The campaign is called “The Black Economic Freedom Movement.”

This historic plan was announced during a press conference at the Alabama League of Municipalities in Montgomery, Ala., on Feb. 24.

Dr. Ken L. Harris, the sixteenth president and CEO of the NBL, presented a three-year strategic plan for the future of “The Black Economic Freedom Movement.” The initiative will harness Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Quantum Technology to build a digitized economic infrastructure, ensuring BBEs® can compete in the U.S. and global marketplaces.

The plan strengthens the nation’s first and oldest Black business organization with an ultra-modern digital ecosystem. It will facilitate direct connections among one million Black businesses, creating a formidable economic force.

“The National Business League is leading the charge toward a new era of economic sovereignty, where Black businesses thrive

through ownership, innovation, and digital transformation—not just survival,” said Harris.

With recent White House Executive Orders dismantling diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs in the federal government, “The Black Economic Freedom Movement” is designed to secure economic self-determination for Black entrepreneurs. The movement challenges outdated systems that have historically excluded Black businesses from mainstream opportunities.

While some may see this as an extension of Affirmative Action and DEI, studies reveal that white women have been the primary beneficiaries of such programs.

Meanwhile, Black businesses make up only one percent of certified minority firms, effectively locking them out of over \$50 billion in public and private sector contracts. In response, the global initiative from NBL will aim to build a global, technology-driven network that fosters economic independence, liberation, and generational wealth for Black communities worldwide.

“The Black Economic Freedom Movement” is more than a commemoration of our past. It is the strategic blueprint for our future. This movement transcends outdated economic paradigms and repositions Black business as a dominant force in the 21st-century global economy,”



Harris emphasized.

A cornerstone of this initiative is the National Black Supplier Black Business Enterprise (BBE) Certification Pilot Program, which has already secured \$150 million in corporate contracts over three years. This model will be expanded to support the digitization of one million Black businesses, forming direct alliances with Fortune 500 corporations, venture capital firms, and global trade networks.

The momentum of “The Black Economic Freedom Movement” will culminate at the 125th National Black Business Conference, hosted by the National Alliance for Black Business, Aug. 17-23, 2025, at the Hilton Atlanta Hotel in Atlanta. A pre-conference will be held Aug. 17-20 at Tuskegee University in Tuskegee, Ala.

This historic gathering will convene over 5,000 prominent business leaders, entrepreneurs, and policymakers, solidifying the movement’s impact on the future of Black economic empowerment.

For 125 years, the National Business League has upheld Booker T. Washington’s vision of self-reliance, economic determination, and collective prosperity. The commitment to digitizing one million Black businesses through “The Black Economic Freedom Movement” reaffirms the NBL’s mission to ensure Black wealth creation from the Industrial Revolution to today’s digital economy.

National Business League

Founded in 1900 by Booker T. Washington, the National Business League (NBL) is the first and largest trade association for Black businesses. For over a century, the organization has been dedicated to economic independence, entrepreneurship, and enterprise development. Today, the NBL continues to be a transformative force in Black economic empowerment, leading digital innovation, fostering global business opportunities, and establishing strategic partnerships that drive sustainable Black wealth.

For more information, visit www.nationalbusinessleague.org.

My Brother’s Keeper Alliance Celebrates 11 Years



BerThaddaeus Bailey is the managing director for My Brother's Keeper in Tulsa.

PHOTO PROVIDED

DR. JERRY GOODWIN
The Oklahoma Eagle

My Brother’s Keeper Alliance highlights its accomplishments over its 11-year history.

Since being named an MBK Model Community in 2023, MBK Tulsa has been focused on driving real change and measurable outcomes for boys and young men of color. Its achievements over the last nearly decade have been the following:

Early Education: Pre-K enrollment rose from 68% to 72%, moving toward our 77% goal by 2029

Safer Communities: MBK Tulsa and the City of Tulsa secured a \$2 million federal grant to reduce gun violence, homicides, and recidivism

Young Leaders Rising: MBK Tulsa doubled its impact, engaging 16 young men in MBK Youth All Stars (YAS) and over 120 young men in our MBK Sports. Ninety percent are on track to graduate, and 82 percent are completing career plans.

MBK Sports: Working with students at Monroe Middle School, Central Junior/High School, and McLain High School, MBK Sports helped its students to achieve 18% higher attendance than their peers, earn grades a half-grade level higher, participate in service projects and leadership activities, and experience new opportunities

from career exposure to stepping onto the OKC Thunder court.

Former President Barack Obama and the Obama Foundation are sponsors of MBK programming. The mission of the local affiliate of MBK is to convene and support proximate youth, caregivers, and cross-sector organizations to implement a data-based approach to create systems change, focused on improving outcomes alongside boys and young men of color.

“At MBK Tulsa, we are proud to be part of this legacy. From becoming a Model Community to expanding MBK Sports and launching transformative programs, we continue to create spaces where young men can lead, learn, and thrive,” said Bailey.

For more information, visit <https://impacttulsa.org/my-brothers-keeper/>

MBK-Tulsa

My Brother’s Keeper addresses persistent opportunity gaps facing boys and young men of color to ensure all youth can reach their full potential. This nationwide, non-partisan effort was launched in 2014 by President Obama, and the work continues as the My Brother’s Keeper (MBK) Alliance, an initiative of the Obama Foundation. The MBK Alliance focuses on building safe and supportive communities for boys and young men of color where they feel valued and have clear pathways to opportunity.

Events

Feb. 28

“Harlem Nights” film and event will be held at Circle Cinema, 10 S. Lewis Ave. A costume party will begin at 6 p.m., and the film will begin at 7:30 p.m. For more information, visit www.circlecinema.org.

Mar. 22

The Dance Affair and Fashion Show will be held at the Greenwood Cultural Center, 322 N. Greenwood Ave. The fashion show will begin at 7:30 a.m., and the dance will be from 8:30 p.m. to 12:30 a.m. DJ Silky Soul will provide the music. The semi-formal events are BYOL and BYOF. MVP Dance Productions is hosting the program. For more information, contact Howard Barnes at (918) 951-5466 or Sheila Herbert at (918) 946-6697.

Mar. 28

“Sister Act – The Musical” will be performed by the Theatre Department at Booker T. Washington High School, 1514 E. Zion St. The scheduled performances are March 28, 7 p.m.; March 28, 2 p.m. and 7 p.m.; and March 30, 4 p.m. Majeste Pearson is the music director. For more information, see [Sister Act - The Musical](#).

Mar. 29

The Links, Incorporated is sponsoring Black Family Wellness Expo at Tulsa Community College, Northeast campus, 3727 E. Apache St., 11 a.m. – 2 p.m. The program is a part of the organization’s National Impact Day of Service. For more information, contact tulsalinksbfwe@gmail.com or (918) 852-7456.

Apr. 3

Booker T. Washington High School Distinguished Hall of Fame Foundation Ceremony and Scholarship Dinner will be held at 6 p.m. at the Greenwood Cultural Center, 322 N. Greenwood Ave. Honorees include Inez Black, Kevin Lockett, Nicole Lynn, Sabrina Goodwin-Monday, Bill Nelson, J. Kavin Ross, M. Reginald “Ice” Terry, and Pastor LeRon G. West. The guest speaker will be Milliard House II, superintendent of Prince George’s County Public Schools. For more information, contact tulsabtw.hof@gmail.com.



Linda Villarosa, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and author, will discuss her book, "Under the Skin: The Hidden Toll of Racism on American Lives and on the Health of Our Nation," on March 6.

PHOTO PROVIDED

Events

Apr. 16

Travis Guillory – Senior Concert at the Greenwood Cultural Center, 322 N. Greenwood Ave., 6:30 p.m.

Apr. 17

Greenwood Cultural Center is presenting its Legacy Award Dinner. Nate Burleson of "CBS Mornings," "The NFL Today," and host of "Hollywood Squares" will be the Legacy Award honoree. For more information, call (918) 596-1020 or visit www.greenwoodculturalcenter.org.

Apr. 30

2025 Women's Leadership Summit will be held at the River Spirit Casino Resort, 8330 Riverside Pkwy. According to the organizers, the full-day program will be dedicated to empowering, elevating, and celebrating women leaders. The program theme will be "Courageous Leaders Driving Impact." The full-day summit For more information, contact <https://leadershoptulsa.org/womensleadershipsummit/>.

May 18

Witness! An Evening of Spirituals will be held at the Greenwood Cultural Center, 322 N. Greenwood Ave., 6 p.m. – 8 p.m. Doors will open at 5 p.m. The sounds of rich history in the tradition of the spirituals, also known as "freedom songs," will be performed. The featured singers will be Joel-Lyn McCormick (Soprano), Phil Armstrong (Tenor), Joseph Bias (Baritone), and Donald Ryan (pianist). The program is a benefit concert for the Greenwood Cultural Center. For more information, visit eventbrite.com

Jun. 13-14

African and Indian Table Talk presents "Across Generations: The Freedman's Journey in Indian Territory" conference. More information to be provided soon.

Aug. 17-23

National Business League will host its 125th-anniversary pre-conference at Tuskegee University in Tuskegee, Ala., Aug. 17-20, and conference in Atlanta, Ga., Aug. 20-23. For more information, visit <https://nationalbusinessleague.org/>

Greenwood Rising Announces "Books For Thoughts"

Pulitzer Prize-Winning Journalist and Author Linda Villarosa To Open Series, March 6

Greenwood Rising History Center is announcing its first Books for Thought program featuring Linda Villarosa, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and author, on March 6.

Villarosa is a leading advocate for health equity. Her acclaimed book, "Under the Skin: The Hidden Toll of Racism on American Lives and on the Health of Our Nation," reveals the deep impact of racism on public health. In addition to being an author, Villarosa is a contributing writer

for The New York Times Magazine. In the magazine, she covers race, inequality, and health topics. Before this role, she edited health pages for The New York Times and health coverage for Science Times. She is the former executive editor of Essence magazine.

She has trained journalists to cover the HIV/AIDS epidemic at various international conferences.

Villarosa has a master's degree in urban journalism/digital storytelling from the City University New York Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism and a bachelor's degree from the University of Colorado. She is a professor and Journalist

in Residence at CUNY Journalism School and teaches journalism, medicine, and Black Studies at The City College of New York in Harlem.

The recipient of many honors and awards, she is a Journalism Fellow of the Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health and a nonfiction mentor for the Lambda Literary Foundation's Emerging Writers Retreat.

The program will be held at the Tulsa Regional Chamber, 1 W. 3rd St., St. Francis Room, 5:30 p.m. – 7:30 p.m. The event is free to the public.

For more information, visit www.greenwoodrising.org.



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