

**TESTIMONY OF JOY HOFMEISTER**  
**STATE SUPERINTENDENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION**  
**OF THE STATE OF OKLAHOMA**  
**BEFORE THE HOUSE EDUCATION AND LABOR COMMITTEE**  
**SUBCOMMITTEE ON EARLY CHILDHOOD,**  
**ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION**  
**ON**

**“The Importance of Trauma-Informed Practices in Education to Assist Students  
Impacted by Gun Violence and Other Adversities”**

**September 11, 2019**

Good morning, Chairman Sablan, Ranking Member Allen and members of the Committee. My name is Joy Hofmeister, and I was elected State Superintendent of Public Instruction by the great people of Oklahoma in 2014 and again in 2018. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you to discuss the effects of childhood trauma upon student academic performance and the social-emotional growth of our schoolchildren.

In February 2016, I had the honor of appearing before this subcommittee to share testimony on strengthened state accountability for student academic performance after passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Flexibility under ESSA has enabled us to develop programs and systems that align with our vision to ensure every child in our schools has access to a well-rounded education.

Through our state strategic plan, which we call *Oklahoma Edge*, we are already demonstrating success. New academic standards for mathematics and English language arts lifted us from 47th nationally to 17th in terms of quality and rigor. Last month, we were recognized by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) for significantly reaching national comparability, thereby narrowing the so-called “honesty gap.” In so doing, we have catapulted from one of the lowest positions nationally on the NAEP mapping study to the top one-third of states. We can now say with confidence that our expectations for kids are

setting them up to be nationally competitive for college and the workforce by the time they graduate high school.

These changes, facilitated by the flexibility afforded by ESSA, are dramatically improving Oklahoma schools, but these changes cannot remedy every challenge.

There are, of course, the stark realities of poverty, child hunger, domestic strife and more. The world outside the classroom has an undeniable impact on the world inside the classroom. A recent National Survey of Children's Health reports that Oklahoma's youngest children suffer more trauma than those in any other state. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Oklahoma ranks 42nd in the nation in child well-being. The Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services indicates that 75 percent of our students suffer moderate or serious depression, and a growing number admit to a low commitment to school and a high risk for drug use.

Oklahoma last November elected a new governor, Kevin Stitt, who has championed the idea of transforming us into a Top 10 state. It is an admirable goal and we are making progress, but a critical pathway to any Top 10 must begin at the schoolhouse door.

How can we equip teachers to move students toward resilience and a bright future? We believe the key is trauma-sensitive instruction.

What do we mean by "trauma-sensitive instruction"? A trauma-sensitive school is a place where students feel safe, welcomed and supported, and where addressing the impact of trauma is central to the educational mission. Trauma-sensitive instruction, therefore, is how that approach is reflected in the professional practice of educators.

Recent work on the science of hope, some of which is being led nationally by Oklahoma native Professor Chan Hellman and researchers at the University of Oklahoma, makes it clear that a connection with a stable, caring adult is the common factor in moving children from trauma to hope.

In October 2018 and February 2019, through grant assistance, Title IV funding and community partners, the Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDE)

organized two statewide trauma summits. Both were heavily attended. Next February, we will hold another trauma-focused opportunity, free and open to all educators. In a state of approximately 42,000 classroom teachers, we expect attendance of up to 10,000 people.

The Oklahoma Legislature has provided much-needed policy support for our schools. A state law signed this spring requires that candidates in teacher preparation programs study trauma-informed instruction practices. Another recent law directs our agency and the Oklahoma Department of Human Services, in consultation with school boards and district superintendents, to develop professional development and resources to help school staff recognize and address the mental health needs of students.

Providing increased support to address the implications of trauma and adverse childhood experiences among Oklahoma youth is a priority of the OSDE. The agency provides professional development opportunities for educators to better understand the connection between trauma, the science of the brain and the negative impact on student performance.

In addition, we began a more cross-agency collaboration to address trauma and its connectedness to student academic performance, chronic absenteeism and behavior. Our Office of Student Support provides on-site interventions and professional development to schools and districts. Developed last spring, it consists of directors of social-emotional counseling, academic counseling, prevention services, college and career readiness, work-based learning, family and community engagement and suicide prevention. We will soon add a specialist devoted to bullying prevention and a statewide crisis response team. Since July, our Student Support team has provided educational opportunities and classroom interventions for more than 4,000 teachers – nearly 10 percent of the teachers in our state.

Through our work toward college and career readiness and focus on Individual Career Academic Planning, otherwise known as ICAP, we have learned that students who intentionally plan for their futures feel more hopeful and show more resilience. For students, the results of intentional career planning can mitigate the negative implications of adverse childhood experiences. ICAP is required statewide beginning this school year, but already students in our two-

year pilot ICAP study tell us that their friends are coming to school more, feel more purposeful in their work and are more optimistic about life after high school.

Through heightened trauma awareness among our educators, we are seeing richer learning environments and increased trust and rapport between teachers and students. Trauma-informed instruction is working.

One teacher said, “After attending trauma-informed instruction professional development, our school brought back classroom intervention strategies. We started implementing them in a few of our classrooms and noticed student discipline referrals went to zero with these teachers. We are already seeing a change in student behavior and test scores.”

From another: “Everything you said regarding trauma-informed instruction has resonated with me. These sessions, these words – they are life-changing.”

And finally, “Going through this professional development has completely changed my way of thinking. I am more positive and can think about the ‘why’ with my students. I have already seen an improvement in my classroom in just the first three weeks of school.”

But no conversation about the impact of trauma-sensitive instruction is complete without students. When we ask students what they need from their teachers, their message is consistent: “Get to know us. Connect with us. Care about us as people.”

When we empower teachers with evidence-based strategies and greater awareness of trauma, we allow them to harness their creativity to develop positive connections with students.

Trauma expert Peter A. Levine said, “Trauma is a fact of life. It does not, however, have to be a life sentence.” Among the most critical of our missions in public education is ensuring our students have the opportunity to achieve academic excellence. Through meaningful and consistent connection, our educators can help our students move beyond trauma to hope — and the promise of the bright future they deserve.

