

**Title:** The Big Walkout

**Item Blurb:** This Blast explains why teachers in Oklahoma and beyond walked out of their classrooms in protest in April.

**Driving Question:** What kind of support do teachers and schools need?

**Background (800-900L): 700-800L**

Empty desks. Closed books. Silent hallways. Recently, schools in multiple states temporarily closed. However, this isn't for any school holiday.

A teacher walkout lasted from April 2 through April 12, 2018 in Oklahoma. Educational professional organization Oklahoma Education Association (OEA) organized the walkout. The teachers protested for better salaries, benefits and school funding. This caused closures in about 200 of the state's 551 school districts. Thousands of people also protested in the state capital of Oklahoma City, according to The New York Times.

The Oklahoma protests come after years of statewide tax cuts. These cuts reduced the state's education budget, according to the Washington Post. Twenty percent of Oklahoma schools had to switch to four-day school weeks. The cuts reduced funds for low-income students. They reduced school elective options. They reduced school supply funds for teachers and teacher salaries. Oklahoma teachers now have the second-lowest salaries in the nation. In addition, in 2015, Oklahoma reported it spent \$8,000 per student. The national average is \$11,400.

The Oklahoma legislature passed a bill on March 29. This gave a \$6,000 average pay raise to teachers. It also gave a \$1,250 pay increase to support staff and state employees. The education budget will get \$50 million. However, the OEA demanded more support. The group asked for a \$10,000 pay raise for teachers, a \$5,000 pay raise for support staff and an additional \$200 million for local education. Many legislators think the bill is enough. Mary Fallin is Oklahoma's governor. "Teachers want more," Fallin said on April 3. "But it's kind of like having a teenage kid that wants a better car."

The protesters think that more funding is important for teachers and schools. Poppy Kelley is an Oklahoma French teacher. She says students lack basic supplies in the classroom. "[Students] want textbooks. They want chairs. They want tables that don't have a bent leg. They want proper technology in the classrooms," Kelley told Reuters. The state risks losing teachers if conditions do not change. Oklahoma loses an average of 200 teachers a month, PBS NewsHour reports. These employees either leave the profession or take jobs in other states. Alicia Priest is the president of the OEA. "Teachers are so drastically underpaid they are forced to donate plasma, work multiple jobs, and go to food pantries to provide for their families," Priest said in an April 1 Facebook video. "Oklahoma is better than this."

Deborah Gist is the superintendent of Tulsa Public Schools. She says low teacher pay affects everyone. “It is horrific what we are doing as a state not only to our teachers, but because of the way we treat our teachers, we’re doing it to our students and to our state as a whole,” Gist said.

This recent pattern of statewide teacher protests began in West Virginia. In February, the state’s teachers led a statewide strike. West Virginia Gov. James C. Justice to sign a bill giving teachers and other state employees a 5 percent raise, according to The New York Times. On April 11, advocacy group Arizona Educators United led teachers across the state in a “walk-in.” The teachers protest in front of the school. Then, they walk in together in solidarity, NPR reports. The group is asking for a 20 percent salary raise.

The OEA officially called an end to the Oklahoma walkout on April 12. Shawn Hime is the executive director of the Oklahoma State School Boards Association. Hime says this protest marked a change. “Investing in education and ensuring elected officials are committed to public education must be the new normal for Oklahoma, and I believe Oklahomans are committed to a future that’s much better than our past. Today isn’t the end game for our children, our teachers or our schools,” Hime told the Washington Post. “It’s a new beginning.”

What do you think? What kinds of resources does your school need? How else can we improve schools in the United States? To what extent should protests affect school days? What kind of support do teachers and schools need?

### **Background (900-1000L):**

Empty desks. Closed books. Silent hallways. Schools in multiple states recently went through temporary closures — but not for any school holiday.

From April 2 through April 12, 2018, the educational professional organization Oklahoma Education Association (OEA) organized a teacher walkout for the entire state of Oklahoma. Teachers across the state walked out of classrooms in protest over teacher salaries, benefits and school funding, causing closures of about 200 of the state’s 551 school districts. Thousands of people also protested in the state capital of Oklahoma City, according to The New York Times.

The Oklahoma protests come after years of statewide tax cuts. These cuts reduced the state’s educational budget, according to the Washington Post. Twenty percent of Oklahoma schools had to shorten their school weeks to four days. The cuts also reduced assistance for low-income students, school elective options, school supply funds for teachers and teacher salaries. Oklahoma teachers now have the second-lowest salaries in the nation. In addition, in 2015, Oklahoma reported it spent \$8,000 per student, significantly below the national average of \$11,400.

The Oklahoma legislature passed a bill on March 29. This provided a \$6,000 average pay raise for teachers, \$1,250 pay increases for support staff and state employees, and \$50 million more for the education budget. However, the OEA demanded more support. The group asked for a \$10,000 pay raise for teachers, a \$5,000 pay raise for support staff and an additional \$200 million

for local education. Many legislators believe the bill provides enough support. “Teachers want more,” Oklahoma Gov. Mary Fallin said on April 3. “But it’s kind of like having a teenage kid that wants a better car.”

The protesters argue that increased funding is important for modern teachers and schools. Students lack basic, updated supplies in the classroom, according to Oklahoma French teacher Poppy Kelley. “[Students] want textbooks. They want chairs. They want tables that don’t have a bent leg. They want proper technology in the classrooms,” Kelley told Reuters. The state risks losing teachers if conditions do not change. Oklahoma loses an average of 200 teachers a month, PBS NewsHour reports. These employees either leave the profession or take jobs in other states. “Teachers are so drastically underpaid they are forced to donate plasma, work multiple jobs, and go to food pantries to provide for their families,” OEA President Alicia Priest said in an April 1 Facebook video. “Oklahoma is better than this.”

Tulsa Public Schools Superintendent Deborah Gist says the failure to raise teacher pay affects everyone. “It is horrific what we are doing as a state not only to our teachers, but because of the way we treat our teachers, we’re doing it to our students and to our state as a whole,” Gist said.

This recent streak of statewide teacher protests began in February, with a statewide teacher strike in West Virginia. This strike led Gov. James C. Justice to sign a bill giving teachers and other state employees a 5 percent raise, according to The New York Times. On April 11, advocacy group Arizona Educators United led teachers across the state in a “walk-in.” The teachers protest in front of the school, then walk in together in solidarity, NPR reports. The group is asking for a 20 percent salary raise.

The OEA officially called an end to the Oklahoma walkout on April 12. Shawn Hime is the executive director of the Oklahoma State School Boards Association. Hime says this may not be the end of the protests. “Investing in education and ensuring elected officials are committed to public education must be the new normal for Oklahoma, and I believe Oklahomans are committed to a future that’s much better than our past. Today isn’t the end game for our children, our teachers or our schools,” Hime told the Washington Post. “It’s a new beginning.”

What do you think? What kinds of resources does your school need? How else can we improve schools in the United States? To what extent should protests affect school days? What kind of support do teachers and schools need?

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school funding, causing closures of about 200 of the state's 551 school districts. Thousands of people also protested in the state capital of Oklahoma City, according to The New York Times.

The Oklahoma protests come after years of statewide tax cuts that significantly reduced educational spending, according to the Washington Post. The funding cuts caused 20 percent of Oklahoma schools to shorten their school weeks to four days. The cuts also reduced assistance for low-income students, school elective options, school supply funds for teachers and teacher salaries — which are the second-lowest in the nation. In 2015, Oklahoma reported it spent \$8,000 per student, significantly below the national average of \$11,400.

The Oklahoma legislature passed a bill on March 29 with a \$6,000 average pay raise for teachers, \$1,250 pay increases for support staff and state employees, and \$50 million more for the education budget. However, this did not meet the OEA's demands — the organization asked for a \$10,000 pay raise for teachers, a \$5,000 pay raise for support staff and an additional \$200 million for local education. Many legislators believe the bill provides enough support. "Teachers want more," Oklahoma Gov. Mary Fallin said on April 3. "But it's kind of like having a teenage kid that wants a better car."

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The OEA officially called an end to the Oklahoma walkout on April 12, but this may not be the end of the fight for Oklahoma education funding, according to Shawn Hime, executive director of the Oklahoma State School Boards Association. "Investing in education and ensuring elected officials are committed to public education must be the new normal for Oklahoma, and I believe Oklahomans are committed to a future that's much better than our past. Today isn't the end game

for our children, our teachers or our schools,” Hime told the Washington Post. “It’s a new beginning.”

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**Poll:** Should the Oklahoma legislature provide more money for education?

1. Yes. Teachers are responsible for each student’s education. They should have a good salary to ensure the state is attracting the best educators.
2. Yes. Having quality resources is important to student success. This can benefit the state and the economy in the long-term.
3. No. Oklahoma teachers already got enough of a raise. They should accept the proposal and return to the classroom.
4. No. Giving more money to education puts too much of a strain on taxpayers.

### **Research Links:**

#### **[What You Need to Know About the Oklahoma Teacher Walkout](#)**

Article: PBS provides an overview of the teacher walkout, including the history of state walkouts and perspectives from those against the walkouts.

#### **[Oklahoma Teachers Take Demands to State Capitol in Second Day of Walkout](#)**

Article: Reuters reviews the second day of the protests and includes interviews with teachers who believe the protest is the only way to get their voices heard.

#### **[Why Teachers in Oklahoma and Kentucky Are Walking Out and What to Expect](#)**

Article: The New York Times explains the walkouts in Oklahoma and Kentucky, what inspired them and how they are fueling protests in other states.

#### **[Teachers, Oklahoma Lawmakers at Odds as Walkout Rolls on](#)**

Article: USA Today reports on how Oklahoma teachers and lawmakers are at odds over the proposed bill and how teachers find it insufficient to meet their needs.

#### **[Teachers, Supporters, Others to Begin 110-Mile March to Capitol Wednesday Morning](#)**

Article: Tulsa World covers the 110-mile march to Oklahoma City, what participants hope it will achieve and how they will accomplish the long march.

#### **[All of West Virginia’s Teachers Have Been on Strike for over a Week](#)**

Article: Vox looks at the protests in West Virginia, the legislation that inspired them and the government’s response.

**Number Crunch:** 1982

[In the middle of the Oklahoma teacher walkout, 7-year-old Oklahoma student Marley Parker discovered that her nearly 40-year-old textbook used to belong to country singer Blake Shelton — when he was a student in 1982.](#)

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