

Normally, I try to write a column each month about issues significant with education in our community. You may have noticed that I skipped last month. I was waiting and hoping for some resolution from our state legislature which has been in special session since September 25th. Sadly, we continue to wait as government gridlock has cast its shadow upon our state. This last Wednesday afternoon, I listened to the questions and floor debate of the Oklahoma House of Representatives regarding a plan to raise taxes to fund the core services that are currently in jeopardy in our state. Those services include essential care for our elderly as well as a raise for teachers and state employees. Part of the funding source was to raise the tax on oil and gas coming out of the ground to a rate that is still below neighboring states. The raise proposed for our teachers in all likelihood would not move their salaries from the lowest in our region or 49th nationally. Despite that, it would be a start.

Some of you know, I'm a big fan of the Peanuts cartoons and the characters within. As I've grown into adulthood, I've found many life lessons interlaced into the cartoons created so many years ago by Charles Schulz. I admire our teachers who work every day to change the lives of our students. They create hope and provide, in many cases, the most stable environment students experience in their day. Those teachers look optimistically to the future while continuing to trust that our state will fairly provide for them. Last February, Governor Fallin spoke again about giving our teachers a raise. This is an annual discussion early in the legislative session and the discussion wanes as the financial realities become clearer. Oklahoma teachers are Charlie Brown trying to kick the football as Lucy, once again pulls the ball away. Despite this annual ritual, our teachers return and continue to do more with less.

Last Wednesday, I was encouraged with progress as some house members changed their minds and abandoned ideology in favor of preserving core services. Passage of the bill under debate (HB 1054x) would require 75% majority of the House and Senate. A similar bill had already been passed in the Senate by a 37-5 margin (88%). I applaud the courageous yes votes of Senator A. J. Griffin and Representative John Pfeiffer on this legislation. Government has always been about consensus and compromise for the good of the people. Sadly, the bill lacked the 75% majority to pass. It seems those who oppose the revenue generating measures never provide a plan for what services they believe Oklahomans should do without. Talking in bullet points with no substance is not governing. Inaction by our legislature is beginning to hit our community as elderly healthcare initiatives such as the Advantage program have been suspended. The ripple effect is sure to touch all of us in some way.

The final irony to Wednesday was staring me in the face as I walked out of the Capitol on that sunny afternoon. Lined up were luxury charter buses in the parking lot waiting to take the hundreds of oil and gas employees back to their offices. They had been bused to the capitol in order to influence legislators into defeating the tax increase for oil and gas production. As I shared a picture with a colleague, their reply was, "They had the money to charter buses while we sell cookie dough so we can afford field trips for our students."

I'm writing this following my attendance at the Guthrie Veteran's Day Parade and program. While there a veteran approached me to thank me for what I do for the community. As I quickly thanked him for his service to our country, it struck me that my service to our community pales in comparison to his sacrifices for our country. To all of our veterans, you have my unqualified respect. Thank you for your service.