



An open letter to UCO Education students, Oklahoma City Metropolitan area professional educators, and prospective UCO Education students:

Dear Colleagues,

As I reflect on our work during the past 14 years of my service as dean of the College of Education and Professional Studies, I wish to share with you here some observations. In what follows, I will summarize my view of some of the challenges we face and identify specific areas of concern, but also offer a message of hope as we look to the future.

These are difficult times for in-service and pre-service teachers and other school personnel. Over the past 10 years we have seen a 20% reduction in funding for both common and higher education in our state and a continued pattern of meager investments in our children and future. At the same time much criticism has been aimed at public schools, teachers, school leaders, and those of us who are serious about comprehensive preparation of future teachers and school personnel. At both the state and national levels, we have seen new individuals and groups come forward who claim that American public education is broken and cannot be fixed and promising a more promising path through school choice, charter schools, and other related initiatives that further threaten public schools.

In Oklahoma we continue to see proposed legislation and rules that make it easier than ever before to become a certified teacher in our state. Concerns related to teacher salaries and degraded working conditions that include class sizes that are much too large, lack of proper instructional materials, a truncated curriculum that fails to include the critical areas of music, art and physical education, and a well-intentioned but harmful focus on standardized test scores have resulted in teachers feeling disrespected and disempowered.

In the aftermath of the 2018 Oklahoma teacher walkout we are curious to see if the education environment is changing. We are hopeful, yet there is little evidence that the \$6,000 teacher salary increase enacted by the Oklahoma legislature will bring more currently certified teachers back to the classroom or lead to increased enrollments in our university-based teacher education programs. Even though we continue to work very hard to continue to improve our programs and school district leaders report being quite satisfied with the quality of teachers and other school personnel we produce, we are at a distinct disadvantage. It is far earlier and less expensive to become emergency or alternatively certified as a teacher than to go through a comprehensive university-based preparation program. Our accreditation process ensures program quality but also ensures that exceptionally high standards are maintained. These same standards are not applied to alternative pathways to teacher certification.

Looking forward, the signals are mixed. Some proposed legislation and dialogue indicates that our elected state leaders see the need to continue to improve investments in schools. However, several measures are being proposed that would have the effect of restricting teachers' and community members' voices in terms of engaging with elected leaders at the state capitol and in other areas. Please know that we are working diligently with our many public school partners, alumni, current students and other community members to share our ideas with our elected leaders.

Two recent studies are important and should be taken as signs of hope moving forward. I have included links to these studies at the end of this letter and I encourage you to take the time to review these reports for yourself. The first is the most recent 2018 Phi Delta Kappa poll on the public perceptions of public education (Phi Delta Kappa, 2018). Results of the poll indicate that two-thirds of Americans believe teachers are underpaid and 78% of parents report they would support teachers in their community if they decide to engage in work-related activities aimed at advocacy for children and schools. The second is a recent USA Today / Ipsos Poll of teachers (Page & Mitofsky, 2019). Results from this poll indicate that **75% of teachers would choose teaching as a profession if they had to do it over again. Additionally, 92% report they love their job**, but 54% have said they have thought about quitting primarily because of low pay and perceived lack of support. Two thirds believe they are not paid fairly and 38% have worked a second job to make ends meet. To summarize, the vast majority of parents and community members support teachers and see the need for increased investment in schools and the vast majority of teachers are very pleased with their career choice, yet struggle financially.

In closing, allow me to share with you some of our most recent efforts to create a better future for children and our state as a whole by improving the status of the teaching profession. We realize that the cost of attending college has risen sharply due to increased reductions in the form of state support and is causing many students to leave college with the burden of loan debt and other students not to enter college at all. For this reason our college has not increased our college student course fees for the past two academic years. Earlier this week, we convened the first meeting of a group of current and retired college faculty members, alumni, and area school district leaders to begin designing a program that will eventually enable more of our education students to receive financial assistance. In the coming months we will have more to report, but we are quite hopeful that this will become a much needed and appreciated program that will enable us to increase the number of well-prepared teachers to enter the teaching profession in the years ahead.

Please contact me at [jmachell@uco.edu](mailto:jmachell@uco.edu) or 405-974-5701 if you have ideas, questions or concerns you wish to share with me. Please know how much I appreciate all of the support provided by our community members and how grateful I am for the wonderful students we are privileged to serve here in the College of Education and Professional Studies at UCO.

Best wishes,

James R. Machell, Ph.D., Dean  
College of Education and Professional Studies

Phi Delta Kappa. (2018). Teaching: Respect but dwindling appeal. *PDK Poll on the public's attitudes toward the public schools*. Retrieved from <http://pdkpoll.org/results>

Page, S. & Mitofsky, M. (2019). More strikes ahead? Teachers love their jobs but can't pay their bills, poll shows. USA Today. January 22, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/01/22/teachers-across-country-love-jobs-cant-pay-bills-new-poll-shows/2623778002/>