Inspiration for a great year

OEA members share...

Why OEA membership is vital

5 things I wish I had known on my first day

Get creative to re-energize
Finding inspiration

By Alicia Priest
President

What inspires you? I was recently asked this question and the answer came quickly—it’s that spark in a child’s eye when they get it, when my own children come home and plays math games for hours, just for fun. When I go into schools and see dedicated teachers and support professionals making sure that our students have the best public education possible. You, the members of the OEA, YOU inspire me! What you do in the lives of students is inspirational.

Jane Goodall said, “Whatever you do makes a difference and YOU have to decide what kind of a difference you’ll make.”

I have been thinking (or obsessing, if you ask my husband and daughter) about the difference that I want to make for our members. In doing so, I’ve researched what a difference OEA members have made during our 125 years: a guaranteed pension through the Teacher Retirement System, state-paid health insurance, the minimum salary schedule, quality professional development, mentorships for early career teachers, advocacy, challenges and wins on behalf of our members, and the list goes on.

The purpose of the OEA hasn’t changed over her years of existence. Likewise, my goals haven’t changed from the time I started teaching 22 years ago. I want to inspire others—whether it be students in the classroom embracing a new language or culture or our members rising to the challenges of doing more with less, jumping through the hoops of new standards, new evaluation requirements or whatever might come of the rewrite and reauthorization of No Child Left Behind. I want to inspire members to rise to whatever professional challenge their work presents.

You are growing tomorrow’s artists, entrepreneurs and leaders. In addition, you volunteer your time in your church, your community, calling and writing your legislators, working on committees and attending or presenting professional development. Your dedication to your profession and to the 680,000-plus students in Oklahoma’s public schools inspires me.

My goal as your president is to build on the foundation that my predecessors laid. Together, we will grow to keep the OEA the most trusted and respected professional education organization in the state. We have some challenges but, together, we will accomplish great things. We MUST meet these challenges for the future—the children of Oklahoma depend on us. We are the gatekeepers of strong public schools.

As you begin another school year, have you decided what kind of difference you’ll make this year? Where will you find inspiration? Tell Vice President Katherine Bishop and me what inspires you during our Tweet and Greet, at 5:30 p.m., August 27. Be sure to use the hashtag #OKEAinspire.

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By Alicia Priest
President

Ohio Education Association
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A legal checklist for all teachers

By Heath Merchen
Associate General Counsel

In beginning the new school year, there are a number of basic issues every teacher should address that can save a world of headache down the road. Rather than seeking our assistance to make up for what you’ve forgotten at year’s end, it’s much easier to take a few moments to address the following basics when the year begins:

1. Make sure you have a copy of your contract and that you’ve read it. Many teachers don’t realize they are on a temporary contract until they are at the end of the year; others don’t realize that the pay they were offered is different than what is specified in their contract. Check now.

2. Check your certification. If your certification lapses, you are immediately out of a job and without a paycheck. Make sure your certification is up to date and that you have complied with all certification requirements.

3. Be sure you have all degrees and college credits on file with your school district and that all are reflected on your contract and pay schedule. Do the math to ensure your first pay-check adds up to what you believe you should be receiving based on your education and experience.

4. Delete any and all students from your Facebook account (hopefully you don’t have any as friends), go through any personal electronic device that you may take to school (including phones, laptops, iPads) and delete any personal or confidential information that you would not want disclosed to the district or a third party. If you have the electronic device at the school site, there is a good chance the district can access what is on it.

5. Read your district’s employee handbook and the student handbook as well. Familiarize yourself with the basics of what is required of you and what you can require from students.

If in reviewing the above issues you come across problems that you don’t know how to resolve, contact your OEA Advocacy UniServ Specialist. OEA advocates have experience in remedying problems in all of the above areas – but the sooner you let them know about the issue, the better.

Oklahoma delegation makes an impact on Orlando RA

Oklahoma was a visible, active part of the NEA’s Representative Assembly in Orlando in early July. From introducing new business items to participating in various debates, the 62-member OEA delegation made an impact on the 94th RA.

Edmond’s Chelsea Foo, seen above on the giant screen introducing to New Business Item #25, which stated, “NEA, using existing means of communication, will call on state affiliates to lobby their state legislatures to oppose high stakes tests’ arbitrary cut scores.” Unanimously supported by the Oklahoma delegation, the NBI was passed by the full assembly.

It was the final RA for outgoing OEA President Linda Hampton and the last RA as a member of the NEA Executive Committee for Greg Johnson, who next year will be back in the classroom as a choir teacher at Enid High School.

Above, Enid’s Megan Stewart (left) and Ponca City’s Amy Scott, Northeast Zone B director, are dressed and ready for the 4th of July at the RA.

Visit ra.nea.org/ to read more about the RA, including NBI’s and passed by the full assembly.
**A passion for public education**

**Priest confident as she steps into office**

Interview by Doug Folks

Everyone keeps telling Alicia Priest that things will be different for her as president. But so far, moving offices seems to be the biggest change for the former OEA vice president.

She attributes the easy transition to former president Linda Amsden, who created a good foundation of leadership in Alicia by giving her responsibilities that took advantage of her strengths.

Alicia takes over as OEA’s 97th president after serving the last four years as vice president. She brings not only experience to the office, but a passion for public education and the hard-working professionals who do “the most important work in the world.”

Just a few days after taking office, Alicia sat down with The Education Focus to discuss the state of Oklahoma public education and the OEA.

Education Focus: What are the top issues facing public education right now?

AP: “Lack of funding, excessive testing, and low teacher morale.”

EF: “And then treating education employees as if they were a pressing issue. We can’t continue to have flat budgets, which we know is an actual cut because we keep enrolling more students. We can’t keep expecting our teachers to do more with less and stand in the gap.”

“Over-testing and inappropriate use of testing is a key issue. When we talk with our members, testing is always one of their biggest concerns.”

“And then treating education employees as if they were a pressing issue. We can’t continue to have flat budgets, which we know is an actual cut because we keep enrolling more students. We can’t keep expecting our teachers to do more with less and stand in the gap.”

EF: “As for improving morale, I’ll be their strong voice out in the public. I’m a passionate person, so when push comes to shove, I’m going to be standing up in someone’s face, if necessary, to let them know how our teachers deserve better, how our students deserve better.”

AP: “I learned those skills not only working with students but with others in my building.”

EF: “I got to have the unique experience of being a member first. I’ve been in the association for 17 years and now I’m a member of the Commission and its work right now.”

AP: “State Superintendent Joy Hofmeister’s philosophy is totally different from her predecessor. She really wants to do things right. With the passage of the reauthorization of ESEA, now called the Every Child Achieves Act, the waivers may go away and that would free us up, but we still have that same type of legislation in our state law. Everything that the TLE Commission has done is in flux right now because of the major philosophical difference (between Hofmeister and the previous administration). In my opinion that’s good. Joy wants to get it right. She wants to build this bridge with our educators and make sure our evaluation system is useful and not a label and punish type of thing. I have a lot of hope for our TLE.”

EF: “During your time on the TLE Commission, you’ve been the lone, vocal critic of VAM (value added measures). Are you starting to see more people coming around to your side of the argument?”

AP: “Yes. When I used to talk at Commission meetings about how value added measures were inappropriate — besides getting yelled at by Supt. Barresi — there were others who would dismiss the idea. But in sharing credible research — research that is not created and paid for by the companies that are going to benefit from implementing value added, people are changing their minds. The more scholarly research that shows VAM is totally inappropriate, which it is, the more people have backed off and want to revisit the idea of VAM, including some of the major players at the state legislature.”

EF: “When you talk to other NEA state affiliate leaders from around the country, how does Oklahoma compare?”

AP: “We have a lot of the same issues. Funding, testing and morale are issues in every state. But I’d put our teachers up against any in the nation, any day and we would come out on top.”

**Well prepared**

**Bishop comes into office with a solid foundation of leadership skills**

Interview by Doug Folks

While Katherine Bishop has attended several National Education Association Representative Assemblies, her view of this year’s national meeting in Orlando was an entirely new experience.

When the gavel fell to adjourn the RA on July 7, Katherine became vice president of the Oklahoma Education Association. She had been elected in March, but as she stepped into the role officially, the reality hit hard.

“It’s scary knowing you represent so many teachers, support professionals and students and causes we believe in,” said Katherine, who is married to former OEA President Roy Bishop. “I’ve seen the load our officers take on. It is an enormous amount of responsibility.”

But she feels the support of association leadership, having served on all levels. For example, she co-chaired the Exceptional Needs Standards Committee for the National Education Association, chaired OEA’s Inservice and Professional Development Committee and was spokesperson for the Putnam City ACT chargers.

Throw in 22 years as a special education teacher and another year as a curriculum coach, all in Putnam City Schools, and she’s well prepared for OEA’s No. 2 office.

Education Focus: The step you’ve taken from teacher to vice president of Oklahoma’s largest education association is bigger than any other career step for a teacher. What experiences have prepared you for the office?

Katherine Bishop: “I think that being in the classroom and seeing what everybody goes through day in and day out, and seeing the barriers that we deal with, has helped me prepare. You don’t do this in a silo, you have to be able to work collaboratively with others. I learned those skills not only working with students but with others in my building. The leadership skills I learned from working with my cadre members and on committees gave me a foundation of how to move forward.”

EF: Do you have a goal for yourself in your first year as vice president?

KB: “I want to be around the state, engaging with our members, because I want to tell their stories. I want teachers and support professionals to know that we are taking their stories and advocating for them. I think the naysayers think we don’t know what’s happening in education … that we just take the NEA agenda and move it forward. We need to make sure legislators know what’s going on in our classrooms, and I can be one of those people who share our members’ stories.”

EF: What are the top issues for public education right now?

KB: “Lack of funding, excessive high-stakes testing — both nationally and statewide — and lack of respect for our profession. We can’t continue to let people advance the (false) narrative that we have failing schools and failing teachers.”

EF: What is the top issue for the OEA?

KB: “We have to do a better job of engaging with our members and future members. We need to reach out to all of our teachers and support professionals across the state, sit down and find out what their issues are and listen to them. When we have those conversations we build trust, just like we do with our students. Those conversations will allow us to go across the street to the capitol and say, ‘This is what is really happening in our schools.’ We need to make sure we are visible to Oklahoma’s teachers.”

EF: What will you miss the most about teaching?

KB: “The kids. Leaving the students was one of the hardest decisions I had to make when I decided to run for vice president. They are one of the reasons I decided to go for my National Board Certification. After a couple of years in the profession, you starting thinking about going for your master’s. But (the degree path) I looked at mean I would have to leave the classroom, whether it was as a counselor or an administrator. I love being in the classroom. Even when I transitioned last year to be an instructional coach, I made sure I went to those classrooms, around those kids, because that’s what gives me energy.”

EF: What advice can you give to new teachers?

KB: “Pull your energy from your kids. Let them give you energy. Find the good in them. And when the day is done, it’s done. If you didn’t let it all go at the end of the day, you’d go home feeling very defeated. If you have a good day, you say to yourself, ‘That worked really well. How’d I do that? How can I make it better tomorrow?’ And if it was a bad day, you think, ‘Well, that didn’t work. Let’s do better tomorrow.’”

Katherine Bishop (second from right) puts her feet up with Putnam City West High School students (l-r) Ally Martin, Payton Bradley and Jordan White.

Oklahoma Education Association

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People sometimes tell me they can’t afford to join OEA,” said Freddie Shiplett, McLoud Education Support Professionals (ESP) President, “but I respond that they can’t afford to NOT join!” Shiplett is a prime example of how OEA membership can mean more than pay for oneself, saving $600 by switching to a policy discount available only to members.

“My association is also important because membership gives me a sense of security, knowing that OEA has my back on any job-related issues. And it isn’t just employment issues. OEA’s Personal Legal Services Program benefits include free legal work for personal needs such as creating a simple will, a living will or simple power of attorney. OEA is the only professional educators’ association with such a program.”

Shiplett’s comments are echoed by those of Muskogee EA President, Mike Walcott. “I’ve seen many educators have job-related issues with administrators, parents and students. In fact, in the last six years alone, 21 allegations of teacher misconduct have occurred in our district, but only one was proven. OEA members among them are glad they had the kind of legal representation available only to association members.”

Other OEA members, including Ardmore’s Patti Green, Muldrow’s Mandy Ramey and Ponca City’s Anna Scott, find great value in the advocacy and political action made possible by the strength of OEA members combine to stand on the front lines, watching all aspects of education and providing protection for our profession.”

If you are content to have little or no input into your compensation, benefits and working conditions; if you prefer to passively let the legislature and Big Business dictate what, how and when you work and are evaluated for that work; if you are unconcerned by your professional liability and legal standing in relation to your students or school administrators; and if you are making enough that you don’t have to bother about saving money through discounted services and products; then you may not need to join OEA. Otherwise, you can’t afford NOT to join!

“OEA is the best hope for us to help preserve public education.”

Scott, who serves as Ponca City ACT’s president, is proud to be part of an association that represents a body of professionals working for the same goals of protecting public education and providing opportunities for personal professional growth. “I can confidently teach and my students can thrive by knowing that OEA members combine to stand on the front lines, watching all aspects of education and providing protection for our profession.”

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“My OEA membership gives me great peace of mind. I know that if I need help with evaluations or some legal aspect, personal help is only a phone call away. Saving through OEA discounts is also nice.”

Mary Lassiter
Pioneer-Pleasant Vale EA

“I don’t know how anyone could look at the detrimental education legislation and policies enacted in Oklahoma and not realize that it is vital for educators not only to know what is going on politically, but also have avenues to advocate for our profession. OEA is the best hope for us to preserve public education.”

Mandy Ramey
Muldrow CTA

Story and photos by Bill Guy
Are we having fun yet?
How to manage your stress and not let it manage you

By Kim Littrell, NBCT, M.Ed.
Teaching and Learning Specialist

ost of us already know how to reduce stress: Exercise. Eat right. Take frequent breaks. Sleep. Accept what you can and let go of what you can’t control. Pray. Meditate. If these strategies were easy to implement, we’d all be more relaxed, much healthier and far less stressed. But the truth is, when you care deeply about teaching and kids, everything that gets in the way of doing your job well becomes an additional stressor and a source of anxiety (and gets piled on top of the constant intrusions of testing, evaluation and other reform demands). Chronic stress is becoming the new normal. Superficial coping strategies may work in the short term, but to stay in this profession, sometimes we need a philosophical shift in our thinking and proactive strategies to make things better.

Renowned brain researcher Eric Jensen defines chronic stress as “high stress sustained over time” (Teaching with Poverty in Mind, 2009, p. 23), and he chronicles the cumulative effects of chronic stress on school behavior and performance as:
- Causes more than 50 percent of absences
- Impairs attention, concentration, cognition, creativity and memory
- Lessens judgment and social skills
- Reduces motivation, determination and effort
- Increases rates of depression

Sound familiar? The impacts of chronic stress on children are also experienced by educators, and the classroom and curricular shifts recommended for at-risk kids can help you reclaim your classroom (and your feelings about teaching). Here are a few things you can do to make sure you manage the stress before it manages you (with thanks again to Mr. Jensen):

1. Go slow to go fast: Spend the first few weeks getting to know your students and practicing routines. Play social games that utilize team building so that you can intensely observe your students’ behavior and reactions. Avoid deep absences.

2. The shift in our thinking and proactive strategies may work in the short term, but to stay in this profession, sometimes we need a philosophical shift in our thinking and proactive strategies to make things better.

3. While these strategies were easy to implement, we’d all be more relaxed, much healthier and far less stressed. But the truth is, when you care deeply about teaching and kids, everything that gets in the way of doing your job well becomes an additional stressor and a source of anxiety (and gets piled on top of the constant intrusions of testing, evaluation and other reform demands). Chronic stress is becoming the new normal. Superficial coping strategies may work in the short term, but to stay in this profession, sometimes we need a philosophical shift in our thinking and proactive strategies to make things better.

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Get creative to re-energize
By Doug Folks

Every aspect of Debra Deskin’s classroom is built to enhance the learning experience. From the tables her students sit at in small groups, to the bulletin boards, the club-footed bathtub in the reading area and even the area around her desk, they’re all designed around project-based learning.

And she changes it all frequently.

“Most of my classrooms have had a bulletin board that I switch out every week or two,” said Debra, who will teach 2nd grade at Orvis Risner Elementary in Edmond this year. “Things that were done the first week of school, I don’t want to see still up at spring break. I want to see things that are showing what my students are learning; the growth, the progress.”

Debra is continually looking for new ideas. Thanks to the Internet, she admits it’s easier now than when she first started teaching 12 years ago. She finds lots of ideas on Pinterest and TeachersPayTeachers.com and comes up with her own ideas, as well. She has even sold almost a dozen lessons to Mailbox magazine.

All the change can get expensive, but Debra has found some shortcuts. She buys fabric in basic colors instead of using colored butcher paper for her bulletin boards. The cloth sheets last several years and can be packed away until she’s ready for a particular color.

While Debra buys quite a bit of her supplies, she’s not shy about asking local companies to donate materials for her projects. For instance, she found the Cotton Co-op in Bricktown near downtown Oklahoma City was happy to donate raw cotton for an Ag in the Classroom lessons.

She also writes grants to help pay for supplies. Her most recent grant from the Oklahoma Educators Credit Union paid for lab coats for her students to wear during science activities. In addition, she found someone to embroider titles like “Mad Scientist” onto the coats.

Debra believes that frequently changing the look of her classroom keeps her students engaged and continually renews her own energy.

“If I’m not having fun with it, I don’t feel like I’m being effective,” she said. “If I’m not having fun with it, I don’t feel like I’m being effective.”
Help is just a phone call away

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*SB-20826-0110*
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