STRENGTHENING OKLAHOMA SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES

We can no longer wait for state and federal leaders to solve these local educational challenges. I want to provide some ideas that have the potential to improve the current system. My purpose is to spark conversations that will lead to action, innovation, and improvement. What follows are pragmatic, research based ideas that borrow concepts from various fields and political ideologies. Some are ready to scale after demonstrated success and others are worth a pilot. Not every idea is a good fit for every community. The guiding metaphor should be a buffet of ideas where communities select potential programs and solutions based on their individual context; “silver buckshot not silver bullets”. Local leaders will determine which combination of programs works best.

PROGRAMS TO SCALE

- **Debt Free Teachers**- Powerful plan to retain great teachers in the state. Offer $5,000 of debt forgiveness on higher education investment for each year of successful teaching in Oklahoma. 60 teachers (and soon to be teachers) are currently participating and will not be leaving Oklahoma upon graduation. We need more funding for this program to address unmet need.
- **Early Childhood Education**- Data are clear that providing young children (0-5) with high quality experiences is a good investment. Pre-K students who have teachers with a degree in education and low class sizes experience academic benefits throughout their educational career.
- **Community Schools**- Need to meet children’s basic needs and academic needs will fall into place. But if a child is chronically hungry or mentally ill, another math worksheet will not improve learning. Working with a group of 36 schools in Tulsa area that have connected community serviced to children at the school site. Learning outcomes have improved and student mobility has decreased. Children who have unmet basic needs are better academically in a community school than a highly ranked academic school.
- **Digital Game Based Learning**- We have created 12 games focused on academic subjects for middle school – college aged learners on a variety of topics. The learning opportunities are incredibly powerful for students who are often not motivated in traditional classroom settings. Our data shows increased learning gains on difficult concepts and longer retention of learning versus other interventions.
- **Early Second Language Instruction**- The earlier you begin learning a second language, the more efficient, effective and long lasting the results. The brain research on language acquisition suggests we need to move foreign language instruction from college and high schools into elementary schools.

PROGRAMS TO PILOT

- **Increase Teacher Home ownership**
  - Financial Literacy for JRCOE graduates: United Way “financial boot-camp” and 660 credit score qualifies for Dream Home Loan down payment grant through Oklahoma Housing Finance Agency (www.ok.gov/ohfa)
  - Homes for Heroes: National organization that partners with local realtors and lenders to reduce closing costs (www.homesforheroes.com/)
  - Community/School Foundations or Leading businesses and citizens provide down-payment (or match) for educators in exchange for a commitment to some years of service
  - Counties or Cities or Community/School Foundations or Leading businesses and citizens acquiring distressed property in the local community and renovating; Habitat for Humanity for educators
Education is the bedrock of democracy and a strong economy. Any kid in Oklahoma, regardless of zip code, should receive a quality education. Educational issues are complex and require public-private partnerships and input from people with different perspectives. We might not see the results next week or next month, but if we can improve education in Oklahoma, our children, grandchildren, and communities will thrive.