

EDUCATION IN OKLAHOMA SINCE 1983

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I returned to Oklahoma in 1983 after an absence of seventeen years. In the eighteen years since my return there has been, in some respects, substantial change, not all for the better. In many ways Oklahoma is a good place to live. The climate, though brutal in August, allows me to ride my motorcycle at least eleven months a year. The state's scenery, though not spectacular, provides a wide variety of enjoyable vignettes. The new canal and Bricktown in general bring vitality and a cosmopolitan aura to the capital city. Arcadia and similar parks are essential oases in an otherwise arid prairie landscape. The Cowboy Hall of Fame, Zoo and some other improved facilities contribute significantly to the quality of life.

In spite of these developments, however, Oklahoma remains an educational and cultural backwater. The state has more churches and teen pregnancies than most other states. Sooners have yet to discover the concept of "public transportation." A larger percentage of gas guzzling four-wheel-drive suburban assault vehicles are found here than in places like Utah where they might actually be useful.

Having described the setting for the primary topic of this essay, the future of education in Oklahoma is not bright. Each year we fall farther behind the leading higher education states like California, Texas, and North Carolina and there is no sign that this trend will not continue. In elementary and secondary education we exhibit a lack of consciousness that education matters at all. Our new teachers leave immediately for Texas, California, Wisconsin, or Massachusetts, and the ones who remain, even in Edmond's supposedly superior schools, are, on average, of poor quality. The following data from the *Chronicle of Higher Education's Almanac* shows the disparity between U.S. and Oklahoma in terms of educational attainment.

Educational attainment of adults (highest level)	State	Nation
8th grade or less	5.6%	6.9%
Some high school, no diploma	14.6%	11.5%
High-school diploma	30.9%	29.5%
Some college, no degree	22.8%	20.5%
Associate degree	5.8%	6.5%
Bachelor's degree	13.9%	16.1%
Graduate or professional degree	6.3%	9.0%

Closer to home, UCO is about to lose the gains it made in the 1990s. During this period the grounds and physical plant were substantially improved. With good salaries and a buyer's job market, the quality of the faculty improved remarkably. Now, however, as the job market improves for candidates and UCO salaries are starting to decline seriously, in the coming decade the gains of the 90s could be lost. The legacy of the 90s is worth maintaining. UCO students have a new sense of school pride. The number of full time residential students has increased, giving the campus more of the feel of a community rather than a part-time, short-time destination. If a new commitment to higher education does not materialize, the ghost of Old Central will rise again.