**ORAL TESTIMONY OF JOY HOFMEISTER**

**STATE SUPERINTENDENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION**

**OF THE STATE OF OKLAHOMA**

**BEFORE THE HOUSE EDUCATION AND LABOR COMMITTEE**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON EARLY CHILDHOOD,**

**ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION**

**ON**

**“The Importance of Trauma-Informed Practices in Education to Assist Students Impacted by Gun Violence and Other Adversities”**

**Sept. 11, 2019**

Good morning, Chairman Sablan, Ranking Member Allen and members of the Committee. My name is Joy Hofmeister, and I was elected State Superintendent of Public Instruction by the great people of Oklahoma in 2014 and again in 2018. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you to discuss the effects of childhood trauma on student academic performance and the social-emotional growth of our schoolchildren.

Oklahoma has made tremendous strides in a variety of fronts in public education – academic standards, national comparability, accountability and more – but these improvements cannot remedy every challenge.

There are, of course, the stark realities of poverty, child hunger, domestic strife and more. The world outside the classroom has an undeniable impact on the world inside the classroom. A recent National Survey of Children’s Health reports that Oklahoma’s youngest children suffer more trauma than those in any other state. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Oklahoma ranks 42nd in the nation in child well-being. Seventy-five percent of our students suffer moderate or serious depression, and a growing number admit to a low commitment to school and a high risk for drug use.

Bearing this in mind, how can we equip teachers to move students toward resilience and a bright future? We believe the key is trauma-sensitive instruction. Recent work on the science of hope makes it clear that a connection with a stable, caring adult is the common factor in moving children from trauma to hope.

In October 2018 and February 2019, through grant assistance, Title IV funding and community partners, the Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDE) held two statewide trauma summits. Both were heavily attended. Next February, we will hold another trauma-focused opportunity for all educators. In a state of approximately 42,000 classroom teachers, we expect attendance of up to 10,000 people.

Providing increased support to address the implications of trauma among our state’s youth is a priority of the OSDE. The agency provides professional development opportunities for educators to better understand the connection between trauma, the science of the brain and the negative impact on student performance.

In addition, we began a more cross-agency collaboration to address trauma and its connectedness to student academic performance, chronic absenteeism and behavior. Our Office of Student Support provides on-site interventions and professional development to schools and districts. Developed last spring, it consists of directors of social-emotional counseling, academic counseling, prevention services, college and career readiness, work-based learning, family and community engagement and suicide prevention. We will soon add a specialist devoted to bullying prevention and a statewide crisis response team. Since July, our Student Support team has provided educational opportunities and classroom interventions for more than 4,000 teachers.

Through our work toward college and career readiness and a new focus on Individual Career Academic Planning, or ICAP, we have learned that students who intentionally plan for their future are more hopeful and resilient. The results can mitigate the negative implications of trauma. ICAP is required statewide beginning this school year, but already students in our ICAP pilot study tell us that their friends are coming to school more, feel more purposeful in their work and are more optimistic about life after high school.

Through heightened trauma awareness among our educators, we see richer learning environments and increased trust and rapport between teachers and students. Trauma-informed instruction is working.

One teacher said, “After attending trauma-informed instruction professional development, our school brought back classroom intervention strategies. We started implementing them in a few of our classrooms and noticed student discipline referrals went to zero with these teachers. We are already seeing a change in student behavior and test scores.”

Such results are hardly surprising. When we ask students what they need from their teachers, their message is consistent: “Get to know us. Connect with us. Care about us as people.”

When we empower teachers with evidence-based strategies and greater awareness of trauma, we allow them to harness their creativity to develop positive connections with students.

Trauma expert Peter A. Levine said, “Trauma is a fact of life. It does not, however, have to be a life sentence.” Among the most critical of our missions in public education is ensuring our students have the opportunity to achieve academic excellence. Through meaningful connection, our educators can help our students move beyond trauma to hope — and the promise of the bright future they deserve.