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Legislators, remove Ryan Walters. End his toxic crusade against Oklahoma teachers



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Oklahoma, we elected a superintendent of public instruction who willfully neglects his duty to foster conditions for the academic growth of our children. Instead, he cares more about pushing harmful propaganda and demoralizing our teachers, already exhausted by his toxic rhetoric.

Thursday, Ryan Walters showed a video at the Oklahoma State Board of Education meeting that demonstrated exactly his feelings toward teachers: Contempt.

What could only be described as a campaign-style propaganda video is laced with spliced-in comments from speakers at National Education Association (NEA) events and other unidentified individuals to fit Walters' mantra about liberal indoctrination, and to drive unfounded fear that Oklahoma teachers are pushing porn in public schools and normalizing pedophiles.

The video is a deliberate attempt to portray the stereotypical angry women of color yelling and pounding their fists, then switch to the calm image and voice of Ryan Walters – as if to say his is the voice of reason. Someone on Walters' "public awareness" team must be a student of the 1940s German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl.

The 5-minute video is not intended to enhance education policies or practices in Oklahoma. Framed as an attack on teachers' unions, it's deliberately manipulative to retain support from voters who are convinced our schools are rife with any of the harmful isms Walters

declares. Teachers' unions are made up of teachers. Walters aside, nothing in that video is attributed to Oklahoma educators, so scripting, editing and releasing it as a "public awareness" campaign is a disgraceful, amateurish attack on Oklahoma teachers.

This misleading characterization of teachers creates more chaos and stokes fear – the only areas in which Walters has excelled most since he was elected. Our kids are hearing and seeing this turmoil. Many already have behavior issues. Teachers do the heavy lifting on the front lines of education. They deserve a leader who will inspire greatness. Ryan Walters does not.

There has not been a single public school district in Oklahoma that supports instruction and content that are not appropriate for children. Not one teaches critical race theory. Not one has transgender students taking over team sports. Yet, Walters remains fixated on spreading lies about liberal extremism. Meanwhile, on his watch, educators who have engaged inappropriately with students are still on state payroll.

Dismantling public education in Oklahoma to remove barriers so all students can learn and thrive is a noble effort. Lying and misleading the public about what's taught in public schools and that porn is ever prevalent is an embarrassing way to transform the system. Now, he's implying Oklahoma educators are teaching kids that pedophiles are not pedophiles.

This is just the latest distraction indicating Walters is in over his head with administration of the Oklahoma State Department of Education business.

Apart from parroting the party line about woke indoctrination in every conversation, he's taught kids to make fun of their elders, as at the FFA convention; pitted them against each other, as with his bathroom poster tweet; and equated teachers' unions with terrorist organizations.

His fiscal responsibilities are also in question, willfully avoiding to apply for competitive federal grants if they have elements of diversity and inclusion, LGBTQ initiatives, social-emotional learning or trauma-informed practices – supposedly because they're not part of Oklahoma values.

Just to be clear, the opposite of those qualities are highly discriminatory and exclusionary,

not billboard values for which Oklahomans, whether conservative, liberal or moderate, want to be known.

Since it was created in 1971, six other Oklahomans have led the Department of Education. Each had their challenges, but none would launch a 1940s German-style propaganda crusade against teachers.

Walters' video is beneath the dignity of his office and Oklahoma's public servants. Then again, he repeatedly shows he's comfortable with indignity. Oklahomans should not settle for such.

Ten weeks ago, we asked Walters to focus on the business of education, that his bigoted and divisive rhetoric was poisoning Oklahoma. We're now past asking him to resign. To Oklahoma's legislators, if there's a statutory path to remove him from office, we call on you to act. History will not be kind to you if the Walters malignancy is left unchecked. Your children and grandchildren will have to overcome not only your legacy of supporting his bigotry and chaos. You'll be blamed for creating it.

Oklahoma teachers and parents deserve an ally who will create a functional climate conducive to teaching and learning. Walters is not up to the task.

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