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# REMOVE RYAN WALTERS

## HRC REPORT:

### OKLAHOMA STATE SUPERINTENDENT RYAN WALTERS FACES INTENSE SCRUTINY AND BACKLASH FROM ALL DIRECTIONS IN 2024

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Oklahoma State Superintendent Ryan Walters is coming under fire from all directions following the tragic death of Nex Benedict (he/they) a 16-year-old nonbinary student of Choctaw heritage. Walters has a long history of bullying and enforcing strict gender stereotypes that harm all kids and create a climate of fear, harassment, and division impacting both young people and adults. In response to the death of Nex Benedict, Walters has refused to make changes to improve the school environment and protect kids. Instead, he is focused on doubling down on his dangerous agenda and attempting to shift blame. **More than 350 local, state, and national organizations advocating for equality across the U.S., wrote to Oklahoma's legislative leadership calling for Walters' immediate removal from his position.**

But that's not the only challenge to his leadership that Walters is currently facing. Over the first few months of 2024, Walters is facing scrutiny from all directions in Oklahoma — the legislature, media watchdogs, local school districts, teachers, and more:

- **Oklahoma State Legislature Working to Strip Him of Powers.** In the Oklahoma state legislature, multiple bills have been introduced in 2024 that would weaken Walters' powers and strip him of some of his authority. House Bill 3550 would "give the Oklahoma Legislature final authority over whether to deny or withdraw a school's accreditation, instead of the Board of Education having that authority." Senate Bill 1395 would add four seats to the State Board of Education that are appointed by the legislature — it passed the Senate Education Committee by a vote of 12-1.
- **Oklahoma Teachers Fight Back Against Walters' Extreme Policies that Prevent Teaching Oklahoma History.** Superintendent Walters continues to champion policies and use retaliatory tactics that have many teachers worried that teaching certain parts of history, including the book made into Oscar-nominated film "Killers of the Flower Moon," could put their jobs and licenses at risk. As ABC News



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reports, Oklahoma is one of the 18 Republican-led states restricting discussions around race and sex in the classroom and Walters is using House Bill 1775 — which bans diversity training and limits discussions around race and sex in schools — as justification to demote non-complicit schools accreditation.

- **Oklahoma School District Sues Walters Over Book Bans.** Edmond Public Schools has filed a lawsuit against Walters after Walters threatened to downgrade the district's accreditation over the inclusion of "The Glass Castle" and "The Kite Runner" in high school libraries. The lawsuit asks the court to rule on the question of whether the Oklahoma State Board of Education or a local elected school board has the authority to establish policies concerning books in the district's libraries.
  - » Walters has used the accreditation process to terrorize districts by lowering the accreditation ratings of those districts that don't align with his staunchly conservative views — including Tulsa, Western Heights and Edmond.
- **Oklahoma State Department Education Faces Mass Resignations Under His Leadership.** Walters' Department of Education continues to face major staff departures. Ryan Pieper, the Executive Director of Accreditation, and Bryan Cleveland, general counsel for the Oklahoma State Department of Education, both just stepped down from their positions at the Oklahoma Dept. of Education, according to a report in The Oklahoman. The following week, OSDE employee David Martin stepped down one day after a report from Fox 25 found that the Oklahoma taxpayers were footing the bill for a national PR firm to promote Ryan Walters in national media appearances. They are just the latest departures in the "steady exodus of employees from the agency" since Walters took office in January 2023.
- **Oklahoma Taxpayers Demand Answers for His Taxpayer-Funded PR Firm Vanity Project.** According to a report from Fox 25, Oklahoma taxpayers are paying \$200 an hour for a D.C.-based PR firm to boost Ryan Walters' national profile. "The emails from Caroline Woods at Vought were sent to national media outlets pitching Walters for segments to talk about topics including fentanyl and the southern border, his fight against drag queens in the classrooms, PETA, teachers' unions, and certain library books." When asked about the contract, Gov. Stitt told reporters, "They're separately elected on how they spend their money and on what their budget is, but it's a fair point to ask questions of every agency that hires PR firms and those kinds of things. It's an honest question — is that good use of the taxpayer dollars?"
- **Local Voices Demand Accountability and Justice for Nex.** Shortly after Nex Benedict's death became public, an Oklahoma City businessman and local politician blasted Walters for his role in the bullying faced by Nex at a public meeting held by the Oklahoma Department of Education. "You and your rhetoric and your inability to do anything as a board here are partially responsible for emboldening bullies to jump a [student] in the bathroom," Cummings said.

**Previously, Walters has faced a number of scandals during his career at state superintendent:**



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- **Scrutiny For Mismanagement and Underfunding Oklahoma Public Schools.** Walters was involved in the oversight of federal relief money on educational programs leaving nearly \$18 million of federal education funding sitting untouched — with time running out to spend it.
- **Charges of Lying To Lawmakers.** Walters also previously faced charges of lying to state lawmakers from a whistleblower at the Department of Education.

Despite growing concerns surrounding his leadership, Walters hasn't backed down from his dangerous agenda. Walters remains one of the loudest voices in Oklahoma attacking LGBTQ+ youth and adults, and working to drive harmful proposed and implemented legislation aimed at the queer and trans community. Through his implementation of administrative rules banning DEI jobs, programs and curriculum in public schools, Walters continues to force his problematic views onto the Oklahoma educational system.

**See recent media coverage below of the blowback Walters is receiving:**

- Ryan Walters' response to Nex Benedict's death only causes more pain for Oklahoma's LGBTQ+ families | Editorial - The Oklahoman
- Educators say they fear Oklahoma law restricts teaching 'Killers of the Flower Moon' book - ABC News (go.com)
- Oklahoma education superintendent under fire for anti-LGBTQ rhetoric after Nex Benedict's death - ABC News (go.com)
- A growing number of school districts are supporting Edmond in lawsuit against Ryan Walters | The Oklahoman
- A Top Oklahoma Schools Official Is Under Fire for Ties to an Anti-Trans Influencer | Them
- Oklahoma superintendent faces blowback for putting Libs of TikTok creator on library panel – AP
- Oklahoma superintendent's ties to anti-trans influencer spark outrage in wake of Nex Benedict's death | The Advocate
- Sticks and Stones' can be potent weapons as Ryan Walters' agenda fuels rhetoric, hate speech | The Oklahoman
- Lawmaker blasts education board and Libs of TikTok after Nex Benedict's death: 'Blood on your hands' | The Independent
- Oklahoma lawmakers want to rein in Ryan Walters-led agency. Here's how – The Oklahoman
- Ryan Walters says library books contain porn. What do experts say? (oklahoman.com)
- Ryan Walters responds to criticism on messaging on LGBTQ+ Oklahomans (koco.com)
- Nex Benedict's death shines spotlight on Oklahoma schools | The Hill