

## Editorial: Eight Lessons on Networked Teacher Activism from #OklaEd and the #OklaEdWalkout

[Daniel G. Krutka](#)

University of North Texas

[Tutaleni I. Asino](#)

Oklahoma State University

[Scott Haselwood](#)

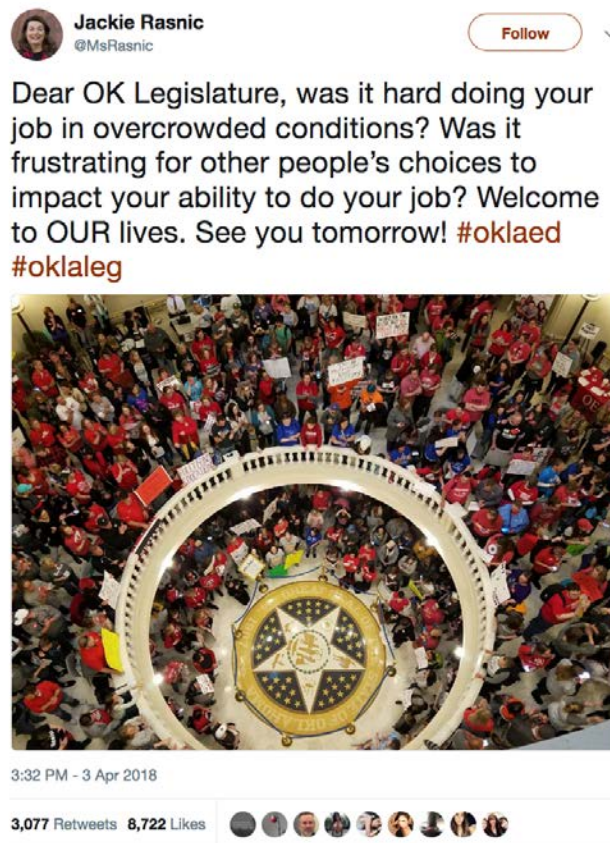
Oklahoma State University

Teacher activism is increasingly occurring in online spaces, but the implications for educators are unclear. The authors use the recent Oklahoma Teachers Walkout and the active #OklaEd network to offer an illustrative example of the power and fragility of socially networked teacher movements. They offer eight lessons educators may take from the #OklaEd network and the walkout.

Mainstream media coverage of the activism of Oklahoma teachers burst on to the scene in April 2018, but that activism has been simmering on social media for years. The rise of social media was initially hailed as a democratizing force that offered a microphone to the masses, but the reality has been more complex. Indeed, Twitter and Facebook offer an outlet to bring marginalized concerns to light and amplify such messages (see #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, and #NoDAPL). These same spaces can also be filled with divisiveness, troll armies, and misunderstandings.

Teachers' online activities around common affinities seems to offer some lessons for how educators might understand activism in our social media era. Teachers have embraced social media platforms to communicate and learn with colleagues, engage in activism, or even engage in learning activities with students. Almost every U.S. state has an active educational Twitter hashtag that teachers use to communicate, collaborate, and commiserate. Whether it is because of the dire and deteriorating conditions in Oklahoma schools or due merely to a core of energetic educators, #OklaEd stands out among Twitter hashtags, and this was apparent during the recent teacher walkout.

We are interested in the walkout not only because of our role as social media researchers, but because two of us worked for years as Oklahoma public school teachers (Krutka and Haselwood), and we have all been active in the #OklaEd online community at varying times and worked in teacher preparation in the state. While we have all been frustrated by the lack of respect, pay, and decent working conditions afforded to the state's teachers, we are also proud of the tightknit community of teachers who have poured energy into informal learning through Twitter chats, edcamp unconferences, and other voluntary events aimed at improving the educational situation of teachers and students. Having witnessed the tireless efforts of Oklahoma educators to embrace the affordances of social media to grow as professionals and advocate for change, we wanted to reflect on how these new media might play into teacher activism more broadly (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Tweet from Oklahoma teacher. (Source: <https://twitter.com/MsRasnic/status/981268193166622720>).

### Networked Teacher Activism

In her 2017 book, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*, Zeynep Tufekci illustrated the continuity and change of social protest tactics with the rise of publicly networked spheres. She argued that the effectiveness of movements are determined by their capacity to alter narratives, cause disruption, and ultimately lead to legislative or electoral changes. Activists can achieve their aims through a variety of on- and offline tactics — from hashtag activism to disruptive marches to motivating voters.

The relationship between movements and social media networks is complicated. On the one hand, social media platforms offer participatory spaces where activists gain power through their digital connections and collective knowledge and support, and movements gain strength through their ability to mobilize and coordinate action quickly. Tahrir Square in Egypt in 2011 is an illustration of this point. Activists were able to find each other, spread news in the face of censorship and propaganda, and even avoid government raids of protest spaces.

On the other hand, networked movements can be fragile because they may fail to develop tactical maneuverability and resilience, specifically because organizing can be so easy online. For example, the Women's Marches of 2017 were able to organize marches with impressive and rapid success, but questions remain as to whether this movement can enact a variety of strategies over time to achieve aims.

The black Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s utilized numerous tactics (e.g., court challenges, sit-ins, freedom rides, civil disobedience, marches, and boycotts) over many years before organizing a large March on Washington in 1963 and seeing legislative change soon thereafter. The Civil Rights Movement gained experience, flexibility, and leadership through many years of activism. Recently, the democratic and networked Occupy movement fell short of its objectives partly due to the vacuum of leadership for negotiations based on clear aims. Will Women's March activists and other modern movement organizers persist and pivot in the face of setbacks and resistance? The #OklaEd network offers a powerful and illustrative example of the possibilities and challenges of teacher activism within this new connected era of activism.

### **The Power and Fragility of #OklaEd**

The #OklaEd hashtag was first used by Oklahoma educators on Twitter in January 2013 and, after a discussion at an unconference the following month, a moderated 1-hour #OklaEd chat started on Sunday nights at 8pm CST. The #OklaEd hashtag has offered one space for educators to discuss both their craft and challenges posed by the state. According to recent studies, #OklaEd is the most active state educational Twitter hashtag (Greenlaugh, 2018; Rosenberg, Greenhalgh, Koehler, Hamilton, & Akcaoglu, 2016), and original tweets (i.e., not including replies or Retweets) using the hashtag increase in election years like 2014 and 2016 (2013,  $N = 21,215$ ; 2014,  $N = 42,918$ ; 2015,  $N = 70,287$ ; 2016,  $N = 75,896$ ; Haselwood, 2018).

In addition to Twitter, Oklahoma educators are engaging in civic discussions and activism in a variety of popular Facebook groups, including Oklahomans for Public Education ( $N = 32,835$ ); #ELAOK ( $N = 3,976$ ); #OKSci ( $N = 2,578$ ); #OKMath ( $N = 4,924$ ); and #Oklaed - An Oklahoma Educator Group ( $N = 1,296$ ). A vibrant community of influential bloggers (e.g., [okeducationtruths.wordpress.com](http://okeducationtruths.wordpress.com), [viewfromtheedge.net](http://viewfromtheedge.net), [bluecrealeducation.com](http://bluecrealeducation.com), [fourthgenerationteacher.blogspot.com](http://fourthgenerationteacher.blogspot.com)), have challenged education narratives within the state. Networked #OklaEd teachers have engaged in policy discussions for years as the state's support for education went from bad to worse. In fact, every fifth Sunday of the month, the #OklaEd Twitter chat focuses on policy issues, and there had already been 17 dedicated policy chats by the time of the walkout.

Since 2008, Oklahoma cut education spending more than any other state. General state funding for K-12 education in Oklahoma decreased 28.2%, teacher salaries have remained static as teaching positions have been cut, and emergency certified teachers have grown from near zero to over 2,000 (What's the matter with Oklahoma?, 2018). Currently, the state ranks near the bottom in most funding categories, and a demoralizing culture of

accountability reform permeates many schools (Chang, 2018; Houser, Krutka, Roberts, Pennington, & Coerver, 2017; Maiden & Ballard, 2017). (See Figure 2.)

**Greg Oppel** @EMHSGoppel Following

I plan on being at the capitol on Monday. Take a look at my plans here: [tinyurl.com/BulldogsforStu...](https://tinyurl.com/BulldogsforStu...)

Please share the website with Bulldog supporters!

#oklaed #oklaedwalkout  
#TogetherWeAreStronger #OKwalk4kids

### Together/ Stronger For All of Oklahoma

- Give pay raises to teachers and ESPs.**  
Lawmakers have ignored pay for far too long. The state salary schedule hasn't been adjusted for a decade. The OEA seeks a **\$10,000** pay raise for educators and a **\$5,000** raise for education support professionals.  
Cost: \$740 million over three years.
- Restore public education funding.**  
Public education is in a state of crisis. This is unquestionable and **undeniable**. Student enrollment is growing, class sizes are skyrocketing, and funding has not kept up. Oklahoma must do better.  
Cost: \$200 million over three years.
- Give retirees a cost-of-living increase.**  
OEA seek a **5 percent** cost-of-living increase for retirees. This increase can be funded through the pension system itself without harming the funds or requiring lawmakers to find new money.  
Cost: \$0
- Fund core state services for all.**  
We need new, **recurring revenue** to fund the services Oklahomans need, such as health care, mental health and public safety. The Legislature must fully staff state agencies and give state employees a \$7,500 pay raise.  
Cost: \$500 million over three years.

3:41 PM - 31 Mar 2018

1 Retweet 1 Like

**Figure 2.** Messaging from Oklahoma teacher (Source: <https://twitter.com/EMHSGoppel/status/980183403998871553>).

Oklahoma's 2016 Teacher of the Year, Shawn Sheehan, was one of more than 30 teachers in the 2016 Teachers Caucus who ran for office to effect change within the field (Eger, 2016), but after electoral and legislative failures, Sheehan moved a few hours away to Texas for a \$20,000 annual pay increase with much media attention (Eger, 2017).

After years of ineffective efforts at increasing support and funding, spring 2018 represented a breaking point for Oklahoma educators. In early March, 24-year-old middle school teacher Alberto Morejon started the Facebook group called Walkout the Time is Now! By



April 10, the group had 78,357 followers (Pasquantonio, 2018; see Figure 3). On April 2, many teachers walked away from their classrooms and marched on the state capitol in Oklahoma City. The Oklahoma Teacher Walkout literally included teachers walking from their districts, including over 100 miles for many Tulsa educators who traversed the state on foot to reach the state capital. The concerns that had been expressed on #OklaEd for years made their way en masse to the desks of legislators and then back around the state and world via social media:



**Figure 3.** Tweet of #OklaEd stage at the Capitol (Source: <https://twitter.com/tiffanyalaniz/status/983767517662498816?s=21>).

The power of the online community was evident as the term #OklaEd was used throughout protests as descriptor for Oklahoma educators in general. Regardless, many state leaders resisted change and dismissed teachers' concerns as they had for years. Without irony, representatives and the governor insulted teachers by negatively comparing them to students with whom they worked daily (e.g., teachers were "childish," and teachers were like "a teenage kid that wants a better car"). (See Figure 4.) Educators and allies marched and lobbied while demanding increases to teachers' salaries and general education funding. They tweeted updates, demands, and support with the hashtags #OklaEd, #OklaEdWalkout, and #OKwalk4kids, among others.



**Figure 4.** *Teacher Responding to Condescending Comments* (Source: <https://twitter.com/ShariGateley/status/982342745892286464>).

Every weekday for 11 days, educators filled the state capitol and demanded legislative solutions to problems created largely by that body. Despite the call to go on by some teachers, Oklahoma's largest teachers union called for an end to the walkout as the state House adjourned early for a long weekend and many teachers returned to their classrooms. While they fell short of their demands, teachers were able to secure the passage of an additional \$400 million in new education spending (Felder, 2018a). It was a lukewarm victory that staved off some of the recent cuts, but ultimately failed to restore 2008 funding levels.

### Lessons from #OklaEd

What do we make of the intersection of online and in-person activism — computers and the capitol? First, we should be wary about giving too much credit to social media networks, as this is not the first time Oklahoma teachers went on strike for better funding. In the presocial media world of 1990, state teachers went on strike for increased education funding and teachers' salaries (Associated Press, 1990). However, there is little question that the teacher ecosystem is different with the #OklaEd teacher network. While lessons from #OklaEd and the walkouts are neither simple nor clear, we offer these eight lessons of how teacher activists might proceed in socially networked movements.

#### Lesson 1: Teacher Networks Can Offer Support

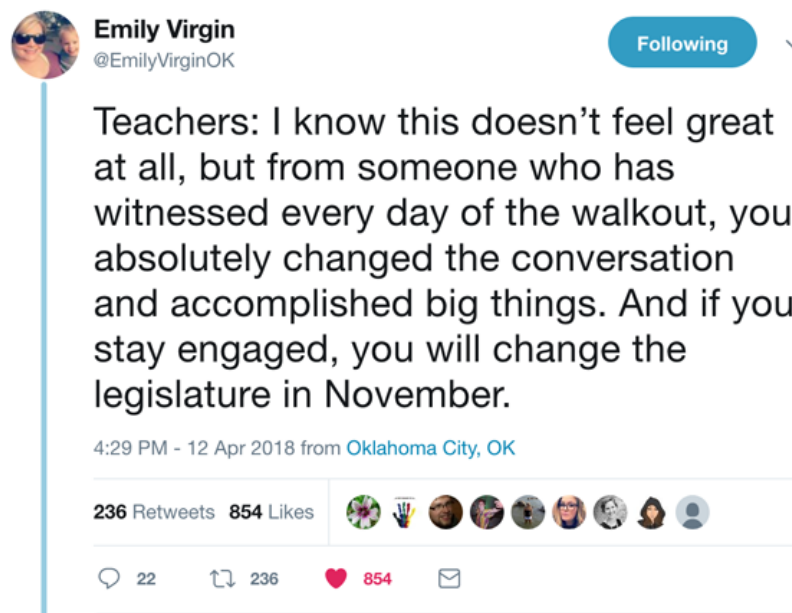
While there will always be high and low times for activism, #OklaEd offered a forum for support and commiseration for many determined, frustrated, and distraught educators throughout the state. Other educators have expressed how teacher Twitter can help stave off various forms of isolation (Carpenter & Krutka, 2014), and #OklaEd's tightknit and active network likely led to opportunities for commiseration to not only air frustrations,

but channel concerns into action. Moreover, #OklaEd tweets and weekly, hour-long chats often helped inform teachers on policy issues that can empower them as activists for their profession and students.

## Lesson 2: Teacher Participation Can Disrupt Narratives

For years, #OklaEd teacher networks pushed back against political narratives that either justified funding cuts or derided public education altogether. In addition to tweets, the blogging of respected educators seemed critical to extremist changes to public education in recent years. Namely, these bloggers may have helped push public opinion against the previous state secretary of education who was unpopular among educators and was swept out of office after only receiving 21% support in her reelection primary. According to nonscientific polls, the teacher walkouts appeared to be supported by the public (Dulaney, 2018).

Numerous national media outlets ran stories of educators describing their financial woes, lack of resources, and lack of overall funding. Teachers not only protested at the capitol, but showed care in ensuring their students had their needs met in their local districts and demonstrated their dedication by walking the long distances from their districts to the state capitol. Teachers won goodwill with praise from the state highway patrol for their kindness and respect during the walkout. Leading up to and during their walkout, teachers have largely shifted the narrative about the state of Oklahoma education (see Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** Oklahoma State representative tweet after walkout ended (Source: <https://twitter.com/emilyvirginok/status/984543967780966401?s=21>).

## Lesson 3: Teacher Networks Can Amplify Mobilization

As is evidenced by the explosion of the Facebook group Walkout the Time is Now! (Figure 6), social networks can amplify messages around action with incredible speed. Similar to

the women's marches, the speed with which Oklahoma educators coalesced around a plan for walkout was rapid and organic, but the movement also combined forces with established unions and school districts. The speed with which educators can move from computers to the capitol is a powerful move activists should use to their advantage. Teacher activists even attracted allies in female lawyers and from businesses and communities around the state.



**Figure 6.** *Walkout the Time is Now! Facebook group* (Source: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/257970398074287>).

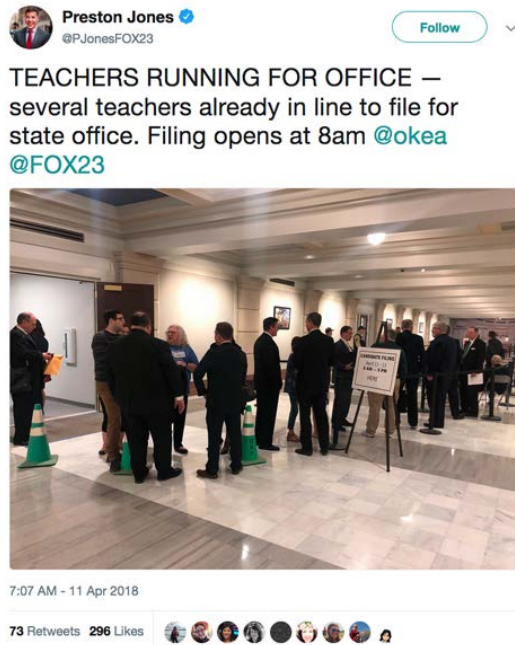
#### **Lesson 4: Teacher Networks Can Encourage Tactical Flexibility**

After years of online activism and in-person lobbying by educators, the walkout showed the ability of teachers to shift into a massive show of power and take over the capitol halls for almost 2 weeks. Furthermore, like they had in 2016, a new teacher's caucus of candidates filed to run for office in the 2018 elections (Bailey, 2018; Figures 7 and 8). Effectiveness requires resilience in the face of setbacks and resistance. #OklaEd teachers have shown the ability to draw on multiple tactics. Their ability to continue to do so will likely determine whether they continue to move toward their aims.

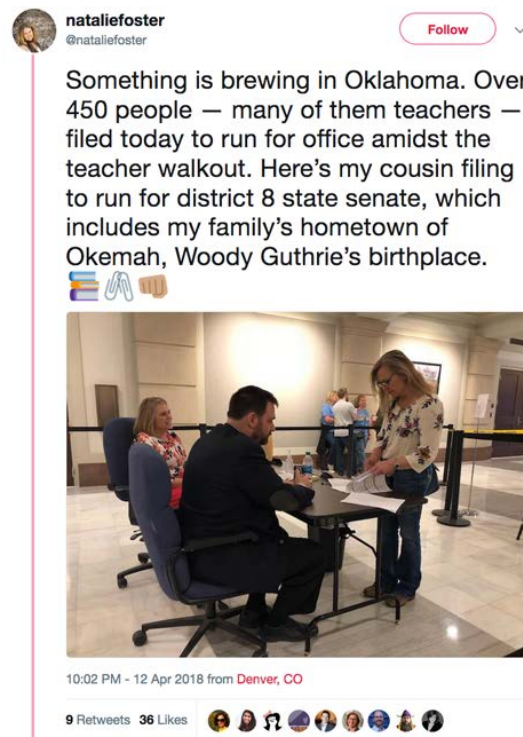
#### **Lesson 5: Leadership is Critical, but Must Be Representative**

One of the lessons of the Occupy Movement is the importance of leadership who can negotiate specific demands when the time comes. The Occupy Movement prioritized a direct form of democracy that was skeptical of concentrated power, but this organizational model resulted in the movement struggling to identify specific goals and a leadership that would negotiate them. During the Oklahoma Teacher Walkout, the state's largest Union — the Oklahoma Education Association (OEA) — played an important role in identifying demands, publicizing them, and negotiating with legislators and other groups. However, it is unclear as to how much the OEA priorities are in alignment with those who are active on #OklaEd.



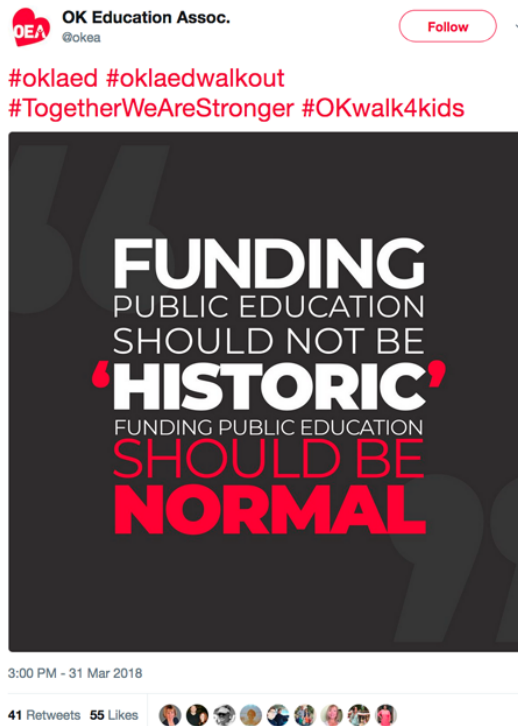


**Figure 7.** Oklahoma teachers filing to run for office (Source: <https://twitter.com/pjonesfox23/status/984040225394610176?s=21>).

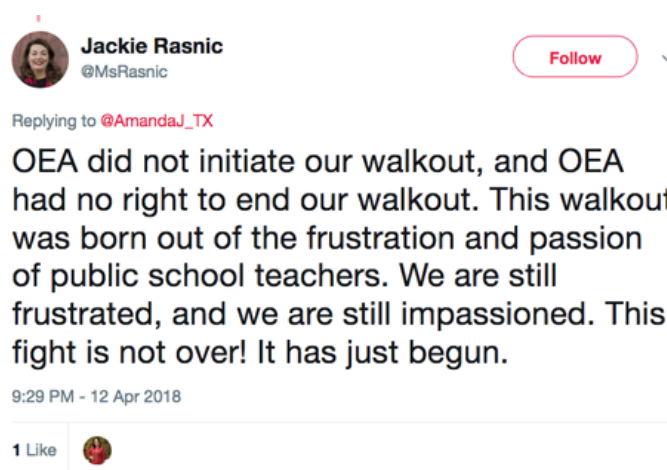


**Figure 8.** Oklahoma teacher filing to run for office (Source: <https://twitter.com/nataliefoster/status/984627738878230529>).

While OEA claimed that a poll suggested that most teachers supported their decision to end the walkout, anecdotal evidence from Twitter along with some articles (Felder, 2018b; Payne, 2018) suggested that there was unhappiness among educators who disagreed with the decision by OEA (Figures 9 and 10). Movements must find ways to successfully balance participatory democracy and effective negotiations.



**Figure 9.** Messaging from Oklahoma Education Association (Source: <https://twitter.com/okea/status/980172899788230658>).



**Figure 10.** Oklahoma teacher response to the Oklahoma Education Association call to end the walkout (Source: <https://twitter.com/MsRasnic/status/984619431623086080>).

## **Lesson 6: Online Activities of Teacher Networks Are Not Enough**

The concerns that were highlighted during the walkout were nothing new to Oklahoma educators. They had been making these arguments for years online, to lawmakers, and to the public. However, despite public support increased education funding, legislators continually ignored their demands as they cut taxes for the wealthiest Oklahomans (Chang, 2018) and provided tax loopholes for oil companies. The \$400 million dollar funding increase likely would not have happened without the mobilization of educators to the capitol, which reminds us of the limits of online activism.

## **Lesson 7: Legislative and Electoral Change are Piecemeal and Ongoing**

The Teachers Walkout achieved some legislative goals, but funding is taken up annually by the legislature, and teachers must continue to press. As we mentioned, #OklaEd activists have been successful in shifting the narrative around teacher salaries and school funding, but legislators and state leaders still ended the walkout with dismissive comments and actions. Achieving ongoing legislative success and seeing teachers and allies win office will require continued efforts that have largely eluded the movement.

## **Lesson 8: Misinformation and Distraction Tactics Not Evident... Yet**

In recent years, those in power have developed increasingly sophisticated misinformation and distraction responses to participatory social media activism. However, a coordinated countercampaign was not evident during the walkout. It is unclear if those in power have yet to develop such methods or whether such methods might be less effective in local campaigns, but most attempts to discredit activists happened through traditional means. However, we did notice some anecdotal evidence of coordinated and targeted antiteacher messaging in the April 2018 teacher walkout in Arizona that followed shortly after the walkout in Oklahoma. Teacher activists must prepare effective strategies for overcoming misinformation, distraction, and even surveillance strategies that might be employed by antiteacher forces.

## **Conclusion**

The #OklaEd community has signaled their power to alter narratives, cause disruption, and effect some desired legislative change. However, the fight must go on to secure demands from the walkout that were unmet, funding in the future, and a teachers' caucus who might advocate for teachers within the state legislature. Oklahoma legislators have decimated public education funding and by taking an early weekend, Oklahoma's House signaled back that they are still unwilling to meet teacher demands even when educators have widespread public support.

Considering Tufekci's (2017) insistence on the importance for movements to maintain tactical maneuverability and doggedness, the question #OklaEd activists must consider is, how can they continue to signal their capacity for change in other ways to achieve long term success? If the movement fails to develop resilience and maneuverability, then teachers like Shawn Sheehan will continue to leave and Oklahoma's teachers and students will continue to lose out. The #OklaEd network and teacher activists offer us hope for the ways in which social media might amplify teacher voices and ultimately lead to the changes teachers and students need.

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