I started my career as a special education teacher in 2000 with a salary of $25,252. At the time, our closest neighbors where the cost-of-living would be comparable, were Arkansas and Texas. Both had salaries that were comparable to ours. The very next year, our wonderful Gov. Brad Henry made sure we received a $3,000 pay raise. That was the last raise for Oklahoma teachers; and Arkansas and Texas have far surpassed us with salaries averaging $15,000 to $20,000 more.

So, here we are in April 2018, with salaries that put us at 49th in the nation, while our governor and legislature are making salaries that place them 15th in the nation. Many of us think all of our legislators’ salaries should reflect what their teachers make or vice versa — they can choose. Oklahoma has had one bill after another go through the House and fail to pass. Many were for far less pay increases for teachers, but we would have been satisfied if any one of them had passed. The Step Up bill in February was based on raising some taxes, one of which included oil and natural gas. The oil and gas companies put out a mass effort with commercials to kill that bill and they were successful. That was pretty much it for us. Many of us had just had enough at that point and different movements started within social media, and then West Virginia got our attention and that really fueled our movement.

The most important part of our movement is that it is ***not*** just about teachers receiving an increase. Some people are upset because they hear about teachers getting an average raise of $6,100 and they see us still rallying and have told us we are being greedy. They do not understand the full scope of our walkout. Educators are continuing to fight because education in general has been underfunded in Oklahoma for far too long. Our buildings are worn down, our furniture is broken, our books are outdated and falling apart.

I was a special education teacher from 2000-2005 and I spent an average of $3,500 a school year to make sure my students had adequate supplies, snacks, and even clothing. I now work as a school psychologist and I spend time in many different schools and classrooms so I know firsthand the struggles teachers make each and every day to ensure that their students have what they need to be successful, not only in the classroom, but often outside the classroom. Those that have the least to give, are giving the most. I have seen teachers feed, clothe and support their students in a variety of ways, including emotionally. A teacher has the ability to be the one person in a child’s life that turns everything around for them. Teachers have the ability to do that through helping them emotionally as well as through academic achievements. That is pretty powerful, but very under appreciated. The funding that we are asking for is to help students have what they need to be as successful as possible. At the very least, we would like to be on an par with our surrounding states. Many other states do a better job. I think Oklahoma can do better than this.

Some of the naysayers I’ve run across say “if you don’t like the pay, why don’t you leave or get another job?” I do not want to leave Oklahoma. I was born and raised in Oklahoma, went to school in Oklahoma kindergarten through doctorate-level work, and have lived in my district for 30 years. I do not want to move and I do not want another job. This is my community and the children growing up in this community deserve to have an education they can be proud of. If we cannot do that for them, then why would they stay and live here? Why would they be proud to be from here? Why would they be proud of their education? I have been increasingly disappointed during the last few days as I have seen and heard what a few of our legislators have to say about us. They cannot take back their words and we, educators, are composing a list to be distributed of who we will not be re-electing!

As a teacher, I always worked more hours than my contract. There was grading to be completed in the evening and lesson plans had to be made for each week. So, many extra hours were spent beyond what I was being paid for. As a school psychologist, that has not changed. It’s just the work that is different. I now score tests, write reports, send emails out to set up meetings and so on. The extra time spent outside of my contract goes on without regard to the position. As for teachers in my schools, I see their cars there at all hours of the morning and nights. I personally know teachers that come in an hour before contract time begins just to get things ready for the day.

— *Deborah Miller, Tulsa school psychologist*