



Governor reiterates commitment to education at OEA convention

By KIM BROWN World Staff Writer
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CATOOSA -- The day after winning the Democratic gubernatorial primary, Gov. Brad Henry echoed past promises to keep education his top priority if he is re-elected.

Henry, along with his wife, Kim Henry, appeared Wednesday at the Oklahoma Education Association's summer leadership convention at the Cherokee Casino Resort. He received several standing ovations from a group of about 350 educators.

The governor noted early in his speech that "this is my crowd."

"Teachers make such a difference. You all shape the young minds that will be the leaders tomorrow," he said. "That is an awesome responsibility, one I don't know I could fill."

Henry will face U.S. Rep. Ernest Istook in the Nov. 7 general election. Istook won the Republican gubernatorial primary Tuesday.

Henry said his wife, a former teacher, is his primary education adviser. He said the state was moving in the right direction in various education areas, such as across-the-board \$3,000 teacher pay raises.

"I don't understand people who believe that in order to build something up, you have to take it down," he said. "Let's build on our great foundation we have in education."

Henry touted the state's early childhood education program as one of the nation's best, noting that national and international experts have visited the state to take notes.

He mentioned the Achieving Classroom Excellence initiative, a bill Henry signed in June that increases students' academic accountability and calls for all school districts to provide optional full-day kindergarten.

"What I have pledged to the OEA and administrators across the state is that we will work with you to make sure everything is done right and to make sure no student falls through the cracks," the governor said.

Henry also pointed out that the state had curbed meth use and, through its "Insure Oklahoma" plan, had helped small businesses get health insurance for their workers.

He told the audience that when he took office in 2003, he faced an extreme budget deficit with a "virtually empty" "rainy-day" fund.

"My priority was to protect vital areas like education and health care," he said. "We balanced that budget and shielded education and health care from Draconian cuts."

At the end of his roughly 25-minute speech, Henry repeated his frustrations with negative campaigning in the governor's race.

"One gubernatorial candidate in the coming months is going to be very interesting to listen to. He is going to tell you that I was wrong to invest so much money in our classrooms and our teachers. . . . He's the one who is wrong," Henry said.

OEA President Roy Bishop told the audience that Henry worked hard to secure fully funded health insurance for teachers and was committed to raising teacher pay to the regional average.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is a no-brainer. We are supporting Gov. Brad Henry," Bishop said to a standing ovation.