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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

OK APPLESEED LAUNCHES THE FREEDOM TO TEACH FUND – A LEGAL FUND TO DEFEND PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS

TULSA, OK – Today Oklahoma Appleseed announces the Freedom to Teach Fund. This is a legal fund that will advance proactive and defensive litigation to protect public school teachers’ constitutional, due process, and privacy rights.

Oklahoma Appleseed’s Freedom to Teach Fund is a unique account that can be tapped for providing Oklahoma public school teachers with with legal assistance. Application to the fund is approved by a small advisory council. The committee works throughout the year raising funds for FTTF.

The wars of today don’t happen on a battlefield, they’re happening over ideas and how ideas are taught. Throughout 2021 and 2022, OK Appleseed and our partners have seen an alarming trend of moving national political fights inside our classrooms and discussion halls, preventing critical learning and discussion from taking place. A significant contributor to this phenomenon was the passage of HB 1775, which prevents teachers from “making students uncomfortable” based on their race or sex. Often teachers are being caught in the crossfire of these idea wars, when they just want to do their jobs. State officials, parents, and administrators are threatening and harassing teachers just for teaching and protecting vulnerable students.

This issue rose to a fever pitch when, during the 2022 midterm elections, candidate for State Superintendent Ryan Walters targeted a Norman public school teacher for sharing access to free library books. [He publicly called for her teaching certificate to be stripped, and incorrectly stated she had been fired.](#) This incident led her to be doxxed and attacked on the internet and in the press.

“I am determined to raise the funds necessary for teachers to have high quality legal representation to access the protections the Constitution of the United States of America affords them when they are targeted by radicalist agendas in Oklahoma,” said State Senator Mary Boren,



who represents District 16, encompassing Norman and the OU Campus. ”To protect the freedom of ideas and the cultivation of critical thinking, we must empower and protect our teachers. And we have to build a legal war chest to do it.”

Nikhil Kawlra, Chair of the Education Committee for the Oklahoma Appleseed Board of Directors, spoke about the state of mind for teachers in Oklahoma. “Teachers in Oklahoma are afraid. They are being put in an impossible situation and are increasingly facing attacks from parents, communities, administrators, and state officials. The well-being of our teachers and the future of our children is at stake.”

Liz Pierce, raised by a public school coach and a public school teacher, spoke about how vulnerable teachers can be because they protect the marginalized and have such a public face in the community. Liz will serve on the volunteer advisory council to help select cases that will be receive an attorney supported by the fund.

The other volunteer advisory council members are Ron Jones, attorney in Oklahoma City; Senator Mary Boren, former teacher and attorney; Liz Pierce, raised by public school teachers and an attorney; and Kristin Hilty Caruso, attorney.

OK Appleseed’s new Legal Director, Leslie Briggs, spoke about the types of cases the fund will accept for representation, “Oklahoma has historically been a state that undervalues and underinvests in public education and public educators. At the same time, legal services have become increasingly expensive, and finding lawyers who specialize in constitutional and educational law is not cheap. That is why the existence of this fund is so crucial to our health as a society – public schools are the lifeblood of our civic engagement, our critical thinking, and our ability to govern ourselves.”

Donations to the fund will open on Giving Tuesday, November 29th. Learn more about the fund at okappleseed.org/freedom-to-teach-fund.

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About Oklahoma Appleseed Center for Law and Justice

OK Appleseed is a public interest law center that fights for the rights and opportunities of every Oklahoman. We approach big issues by tackling the root causes – criminal & juvenile justice, education justice, and election justice – and we take our work wherever we believe we can do the most good, whether that’s in the courthouse, at the Capitol, or in the community. We are a member of the [Appleseed Network](#), a network of likeminded legal justice centers across the country and in Mexico. Learn more at okappleseed.org.