

Google Effect Rubs Off on Schools in One Rural Oklahoma Town

By [QUENTIN HARDY](#)



Don Raleigh, the schools superintendent in Pryor, Okla., where the arrival of a huge Google data center has been a boon for schools. Since 2011, Google has donated \$1.5 million in Mayes County, in addition to offering free Wi-Fi. Credit Shane Brown for The New York Times

PRYOR, Okla. — Students at Pryor High School study robotics. Elementary schools have basic computer programming classes using free laptops, online collaboration software and Wi-Fi spread across this small town in Oklahoma's Green Country.

“We have to prepare them for their future, not our past,” said Don Raleigh, superintendent of the town's schools. “You have to have new skill sets.”

At Wagoner High School, 25 miles south, students in an overcrowded classroom learn about word processing and spreadsheets on old desktop computers. In a recent session, some students napped, while others watched a documentary about high school football.

“It’s pretty obvious that we are the have-nots,” said Randy Harris, superintendent of Wagoner schools. Rather than plan for the online future, where all the good jobs will be, he said, “we’re trying to provide enough textbooks and teachers.”

The difference between these towns is the jackpot that arrived in the form of an enormous Google data center.

As increasing focus is being paid to the wealth and jobs created by tech companies outside Silicon Valley, Google’s arrival in small-town Pryor serves as a complex example of what happens when a modern internet company builds one of its data centers in a community.

While they do bring in some work, these [mostly automated facilities will never provide](#) the thousands of good-paying blue-collar jobs that come with a new auto plant. What they do bring, however, is some stability to local tax revenues, and — at least in the case of Google — a cash-rich megacompany looking to make nice with the locals.

Since 2010, Google has been building a giant computing complex in Pryor, a town of 9,500 people in Mayes County, about 40 miles east of Tulsa. Google’s only larger center is in Council Bluffs, Iowa, another place with cheap land and power and abundant water.

With a recently announced \$1.3 billion expansion, Google figures it will have put \$2.5 billion into the Pryor site, which houses hundreds of thousands of computer servers. The Mountain View, Calif., company is now officially Mayes County’s largest taxpayer, a windfall for Pryor schools in a state that the United States Census Bureau says has the nation’s second-lowest spending per pupil.

While Wagoner’s industrial property tax base, the biggest part of local school funding in Oklahoma, is assessed at \$65 million, Pryor’s is assessed at \$430 million. Over \$300 million of that is ascribed to Google.

Almost none of the \$18.4 million that Pryor schools got last year actually came from Google, however. A business-friendly law dating from 1985 means the state paid \$23.9 million of Google’s local property taxes for 2016, and Google paid just \$1.2 million. That was still enough to make it the largest taxpayer in the county.

Google gets a similar deal for the first five years of development, then picks up the tab in the sixth year, minus depreciation, or the presumed wear and tear on assets like the servers housed in the complex. Google says it has no idea what it will eventually pay.

At the same time, a drop in the price of [oil](#) and natural gas, mainstays of Oklahoma tax revenue, have compelled the state to cut funding to many schools. Last year, Wagoner, population 8,600, had a budget of \$14 million for its schools, down from \$18 million five years ago.

On a recent Monday, Mr. Harris shivered under three shirts in a half-lit, half-heated building. State budget cuts had forced Wagoner to a school week of four longer days.

Pryor, meantime, has weekend academic competitions, bonuses for teachers, and sparkling new classrooms. Higher taxes enabled Pryor to raise \$60 million in bonds. It set aside money for textbooks, technology and buildings.



The Google data center has also benefited the community. Credit Google

In a sixth-grade class, youngsters do math on their laptops, and are encouraged to “get out of their comfort zones” by looking at online resources like Khan Academy, a tutoring program.

Google did not bring a bonanza of jobs, compared with the traditional manufacturing operations [for which Oklahoma’s tax break was intended](#). The Pryor data center has 115 Google employees, 230 full-time contractors for things like security and groundskeeping, and 150 part-time workers, according to Mike Edwards, the data center facility manager.

What Google does bring, in abundance, is largess. Since 2011, Google has donated \$1.5 million in Mayes County, largely for education in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, or STEM. The Chromebooks, laptops that run on a Google operating system, are part of those donations.

The free Wi-Fi is on top of the school donations. There are “Google Fests” where students and businesses can learn about coding and e-commerce. The company subsidizes elementary school classes

in writing software. Twenty volunteers come into schools to help students with things like building underwater robots.

“We changed things here, with exposure to a world they never knew existed,” said Brenda Standridge, manager of Google’s Pryor facility. “Eventually every job is going to be a tech job.”

Google didn’t used to be this open or generous in towns where it was based, said Andrew Silvestri, Google’s head of public policy for the central United States. Over the years, corporate secrecy created “a lot of rumors, a sense of mystery,” that made for bad blood with local residents, he said.

Pryor recently gave accredited teachers a \$2,000 bonus, a lot of money in a state where teacher salaries start at \$31,600 and top out at \$46,000. Other Oklahoma educators have been leaving for better-paying jobs in Texas, Kansas and Arkansas.

One sign of the crisis in most public schools in Oklahoma is its annual program that puts uncertified people in a classroom on an emergency basis. In the 2011-12 school year, there were 32 of these emergency teachers. In the first half of this school year, there are 1,082. Voters recently defeated a proposed sales tax increase for higher teaching salaries, one cent per transaction, 59 percent to 41 percent.

“The heavy lifting of government must have engaged communities to sustain the work of educating students,” said Joy Hofmeister, Oklahoma’s state schools superintendent. “Each community will have strategies that fit its area.”

That works in Pryor, or Bartlesville, where Phillips 66 has a headquarters, and a few years ago gave the schools computer and science labs. Skilled workers volunteer there, too.

“I don’t know another district that has what we and Pryor do,” said LaDonna Chancellor, principal of Bartlesville High School.

Lately some Pryor students have gone on to prestigious institutions like Duke University and Brown University. Others are at state and vocational schools.

That’s not to say all the problems have gone away. Last year, nine parents of children from one of Mr. Raleigh’s second-grade classes faced drug offenses, mostly for use of opioids or methamphetamine. Fifty-two percent of Pryor students get free lunches.

Down the road, homes in Wagoner, a charming community by Fort Gibson Lake, now list for about \$82,000, compared with \$145,000 in Pryor. Businesses include a shopping cart factory, a small hospital and a maker of coatings for truck beds. Children depend on ad sales on school posters for things like their yearbook, music classes, or sports.

“They help out as they can, but mostly it’s \$300 a pop,” said Mr. Harris, the superintendent. “It’s not a \$500,000 donation.”

In fact, that is what a wealthy local recently gave Wagoner. It bought an indoor football training facility. On Dec. 2 the Wagoner Bulldogs won their third straight state championship, in a division for smaller schools.