

Troy High School

By Daniel Dominguez with photos by Steven Clary

January 11 the Kansas State Legislature convened for their 90-day session in Topeka. The citizen senators and representatives will work during this session to solidify the 2011 budget in hopes to decrease Kansas' \$400 million budget deficit.

Although many state programs are on the chopping block, one area of spending that many people are anxious to see the outcome of is education. Education funding has been a main topic of debate for this year's legislature. The governor addressed K-12 education in his State of the State address by saying, "It is at the very essence of what makes Kansas, Kansas."

The governor's plan not to cut funding for education but instead to raise the state sales tax by one cent and increase the "sin tax" on cigarettes and tobacco, a tax that was last increased in 2002 by fifty-five cents, pleased many educators. Yet some do not believe that this will help. As Derrick Sontag, state director for Americans for Prosperity-Kansas, told The Kansas Progress Website in a 2009 story by Jen Rezac, "...Raising cigarette taxes simply drives Kansas consumers to other states to purchase tobacco products. It clearly results in lower cigarette tax revenues..."

Representative Jerry Henry thinks that the answer lies in repealing state tax breaks to services like those offered by attorneys and accountants. Also, he thinks a re-imposed estate tax with a cap may help close the large gap. During an interview on January 28, he remarked that the legislature is going to have to get "creative."

Senator Ruth Teichman of Stafford, a town of a little more than one-thousand people, believes that this creativity should not come in the form of consolidation. As a voice for the smaller school districts in Kansas, Senator Teichman recognizes that many schools in Kansas are small and, "The loss of money...is going to hurt." Consolidating, however, would only increase travel distance for students and the state would then have to pay consolidation incentives, something the state is obviously in no position to do. Senator Teichman said, "Small schools need to look to their communities. I can't say that anything is being done to protect small schools."

Governor Mark Parkinson, who said in his State of the State address, "We've created a world class public school system," would agree that no more cuts can be made to the education budget in order to maintain the level of performance Kansas has been so proud of, and that, as Minority Leader Anthony Hensley put it in a press conference on January 28, "We aren't cutting fat anymore, we are into the meat and bone."

Republican Senator Dennis Pyle sees otherwise. Senator Pyle was interviewed on January 28 by several student reporters but declined being photographed or taped, saying he was not prepared and usually likes to be. There was an overwhelming sense that Senator Pyle did not feel education had taken a blow as large as the Democrats felt it had. Figures and reports Senator Pyle produced from outside sources told a tale of increased revenue and a larger budget for the Kansas General Funds. This statement comes as a contradiction to his column "The Pyle File," which was published as a response to the State of the State address in his district's newspapers, in which he blames the bully pulpit system and "the failure to make substantial investments in the private sector." Among many remarks made by the senator, he also felt that the governor's plan to decrease the

deficit would not work. Although, Senator Pyle would probably just say the governor was campaigning.

Still, the senator felt that the government's far-reaching hands were too far into Kansas' pockets. He proposed that further cuts in education come from the administration, where surely there is fat to spare.

As state legislators continue to work to meet goals and appease their constituents, it is unclear as to how long this process will take. Although all are awaiting the outcome, movement of such an important subject is slow. Perhaps Kansans will know the fate of state spending on education by the end of April.