

Statehouse Reporter for a Day

Erin Bradley and Carlie Blaufuss, Newton High School

In his State of the State speech, Governor Mark Parkinson stated, “As a result of my last cuts, schools have closed and universities have laid off professors...our road maintenance has stopped and payments to our Medicaid providers have decreased. We have cut beyond the point of waste and into the foundation of these critical services.” From these cuts, many schools in Kansas have made changes to the current year and rethought their plans for the coming year. Newton has already made changes in scheduling and pay-to-play fees.

Scheduling has been changed from a block four schedule to a merge of a block and a seven-hour day schedule. The new schedule will have four 45 minute classes daily, including a daily seminar, and two alternating 90 minute classes.

To save money many schools are making a similar change from block scheduling. Legislatures believe this could be a step in the right direction. Teachers on the other hand, do not believe all things can be taught in such a short period.

“Teachers who typically lecture extensively may not recognize the problem, but innovative teachers, who focus on higher order thinking skills, will tell you that 45 or 50 minutes disrupts the flow,” English teacher Lisa Otter said. “I won’t be able to use as many learning, engaging, enrichment activities because I will be spending more time with beginning and ending activities. Anytime you have to start and stop like that takes quality time from reflection, activities and discussions. Consequently, even less homework will be handed in on time because there won’t be time to begin assignments in class. Students will be on their own essentially.”

Scheduling was the initial change to help soften the blow of the cuts. Another change is student pay-to-play fee. This fee will be raised from \$30

per student per year with a cap for multiple athlete families to \$50 per student per sport with no cap. Science teacher Justin Raybern thinks pay-to-play can be an issue for some athletes and their families. Principal Ken Rickard sees the number of next years teachers decreasing along with athletes numbers.

“There is a great possibility that class sizes will increase because its going to be really hard with the budget constraints to replace any teachers who move on to some other place or retire,” Rickard said.

Seeing no help in the immediate future, Rickard thinks Parkinson has some great ideas to salvage schools. House Representative Marc Rhoades’ and Senator Carolyn McGinn’s idea of ‘spreading the pain’ is the next step in educational budgets differed from Parkinson’s views.

“Education takes up over half our budget,” McGinn said. “It is very sad-denning to me when I look at the developmental disabilities, physical mental, health disabilities folks take over a 50% cut. If you have looked at what the schools have taken so far accumulative, from all the money they gained, stimulus money, etc. it’s roughly 2% cut. We are looking at all sources of funding. My hope is that we come out with a combination of solutions. Not hurt anyone too bad, but still have a severe cut.”

McGinn and Rhoades say more cuts should be made to education, while the Parkinsons hesitate to make cuts. Educational cuts are currently at the 2006 level and with 11,000 more students, these cuts are more significant. In an address to high school journalist, Stacy Parkinson said she and the governor agreed the students of Kansas deserve the quality of education they received.

“Everyone of you and every other student in Kansas must receive the best education we as a state can

offer,” Stacy said. “The education I received, your governor received, your teachers and parents received, you are entitled to that, that is your birthright.”

In a briefing with legislatures, House Representative Marti Crow responded to questions the future of Kansas schools.

“I think the schools in Kansas belong to all of us,” Crow said. “And every student in Kansas has the right same kind of quality education. It is our state’s constitutional duty for the legislature that everyone of you gets a good education and has all of the advantages as far as technology and all of the things that make for a good education. That is an investment that the state makes because you are the future; you are the workers of the future, you are the people who will keep the democracy going.”

A related issue facing the Kansas government is the re-opening of the Montoy v. State of Kansas case. The case which was recently reopened to the Kansas Supreme Court, asks for the Court to make a decision on the issues of: the Legislations remedy to the unconstitutional school finance system in 2005 and 2006 and legality of current funding cuts. McGinn said does not agree with the step Kansas schools are taking.

“I am disappointed that the schools have decided to sue us,” McGinn said. “Because if that law suit goes forward its going to take anywhere from three to five years to get out to come to a solution. And in three to five years we will be out of this recession.”

The case is currently backed by 74 schools from across Kansas who are all a part of School for Fair Funding (SFF). Newton School district has become a part of this group and has supported the case since its inception.

Beyond education cuts, one billion dollars have been cut from other places in the state’s budget, meaning

cuts have been coming from every possible outlet.

“Like any organization, public or private, there was waste in state government,” Parkinson said in the State of the State. “That made the first round of cuts relatively easy, but as the deficit grew, the budget cuts have been brutal. We are way beyond the point of cutting waste.”

In order to maintain stability, the government would need a sum of approximately \$400 million. Not to dig us out of the hole, but simply preserve what cuts have already been made.

The governor’s plan of action would involve taxing, a 10 percent cut to Medicaid, raising the tobacco tax from 79 cents a pack, to \$1.34 and raising the sales tax by a cent for 36 months. McGinn suggested some additional taxes be made.

“I think we need to have this discussion about alcohol tax. It hasn’t been raised, to my understanding, since 1977,” McGinn said. “If we’re going to talk about these things from a health policy perspective, to offset some of the costs that we have, then we need to throw everything on the table, I think we should put a tax on soda pop.”

Although Parkinson and other legislators believe education has taken enough of a hit, Rhoades does not think taxing is the answer.

“One of the easiest things a legislature can do is raise taxes,” Rhoades said. “I don’t think that’s the wisest thing for our businesses right now. A tax increase, especially in these kinds of times is not a smart idea. I would say that we’ve got plenty of places to cut, we just have to find where it is and do it compassionately. We’ve got to put the tourniquet on and stop the bleeding and say ‘wait a minute, we’ve got to do things differently.’”