

Budget shortfall threatens education

Legislators scramble for viable solutions

By Samantha Schwartz

Like the famous groundhog, the Kansas legislature has come out of its hibernation to face the darkening shadow of budget cuts and at least six more weeks of grueling choices.

The Kansas budget is currently in a \$400 million deficit, and the Kansas constitution requires the legislature to balance the budget each year. However, there seem to be as many ideas to solve the budget crisis as there are legislators. Among the controversial topics is how to fund K-12 education.

Rep. Doug Gatewood, D-Columbus, argues that education can change lives. Based on his experience as a teacher of juvenile offenders at Capital City School in Topeka, he has first-hand knowledge of the benefits of funding education.

“We can’t maintain the tax base if we don’t have successful workers,” Gatewood said. “We have to invest in an educated work force.”

Assistant Executive Director for the Kansas School Board Mark Tallman agrees.

“We have to weigh the effects of a money deficit now versus a knowledge deficit in the future,” Tallman said.

Rep. Jill Quigley, R-Lenexa, said that all students deserve “a suitable education.”

Most legislators agree that K-12 education is important. However, the problem lies in defining the essentials of a “suitable” education.

“We need to decide where education stops,” Sen. Marci Francisco, D-Lawrence, said. “For example, kids do better in school if they eat a good breakfast and lunch. Should we spend the extra two cents for fresh fruit and veggies?”

Governor Parkinson’s Divisive Proposal

To address the deficit, Governor Mark Parkinson proposed raising the sales tax from 5.3 percent to 6.3 percent.

“It’s not my first choice to raise taxes,” Sen. Tom Holland, D-Baldwin City, said. “We’d just be shifting the tax burden to impact the lower-income people the worst.”

Kansas First Lady Stacy Parkinson disagrees.

“Because the legislature is only in session for three months, they’re not seeing the effects as clearly,” Parkinson said. “It’s so disappointing to see legislators voting against raising taxes because they can’t see that we can’t cut any more from education.”

Kansas National Education Association's chief lobbyist Mark Desetti agrees.

"[Some legislators] say we just need to cut the fat from education," Desetti said. "We've cut the fat already, and now we're into muscle and bone. They can't say raising taxes is off the table. That's wrong for the state of Kansas. It's irresponsible."

The sales tax was raised most recently in 2002, when the 4.9 percent tax grew to the current 5.3 percent tax.

"Things are much worse now than in 2002," Sen. Anthony Hensley, D-Topeka, said. "Before this year, we never had two years in a row where the tax revenue was down, but now it's been down four years in a row. We need to think about how to raise revenue for the state instead of making more cuts."

According to The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, since January 2009, over 30 states have raised taxes to deal with their deficit.

Other Options

Legislators against raising the sales tax rate are searching for other ways to solve the problem.

Rep. Sheryl Spalding, R-Overland Park, believes that the threat to education can be minimized by allowing local districts greater authority to raise money. She favors a bill that would allow school districts to raise money for themselves if their spending budget is below the state average. This would allow local donors to help fund education to a certain limit.

Hensley said that local funding will not be enough. He favors eliminating tax exemptions. When a business or organization does not have to contribute taxes, the state loses revenue that could be used to fund education.

"When I started here, there were 13 groups listed on the sales tax exemption list," Hensley said. "Now we're up to 78. We need to put that money back on the books and fill in the \$350 million hole we're in."

Francisco agrees that tax exemptions need to be scaled back.

"I talked to the leader of a Girl Scout troop, and she told me it was too hard for the girls to calculate sales tax; I told her 'that's why we need to put that money back into education,'" Francisco said.

Kansas Schools Go to Court

Many school districts have decided to sue the state to get more funding.

"[Suing the state] will certainly get the legislators' attention," Holland said. "We have a constitutional obligation to fund K-12 education, but when weighed against cuts in health care and public safety, it doesn't leave us with a lot easy choices."

Francisco understands the districts' desire to sue the state; however, she hopes they will not spend money given to them by the state to fund the case.

"Districts should raise money to sue the state outside of the money we give them for education," Francisco said.

Despite legislators' pleas, The Wichita School Board voted to reopen the State vs. Montoya educational funding case of 1999. Almost 70 other school districts across the state have followed suit.

"If districts can't sue the state when they aren't being funded properly, when would they want to sue?" Desetti said. "People sue when they have grievances, not when everything is hunky-dory."

While there is not a happy ending in sight, there is hope that the process will eventually be beneficial.

"The silver lining is that people are really looking at the school formula that exists," Quigley said. "Someday we will see the benefits of deciding what is important to fund in education."