

“Education is a priority, it’s my top priority because over 52 percent of the state’s general budget is spent on K-12 education,” said Representative Doug Gatewood.

In the last year, schools have received budget cuts that total nearly \$241 million. Teachers and employees of the USD 493 district voted to take a three percent pay cut to help relieve the deficit. Gatewood referred to the financial woes of the Columbus school district as a “huge hit.” He also credited the budget cuts to the declining enrollment and the decrease in at-risk students.

As of January, Governor Mark Parkinson has been pushing for an increase in taxes to dig Kansas out of a potential \$400 million hole. Tax increases would include a three year, one cent increase in sales tax; also included would be a cigarette and tobacco tax that would raise the tax from 79 cents to \$1.34 a pack, which is the national average. A liquor tax is also in the discussion.

Representative Gatewood said he could not support any type of alcohol or tobacco tax as anything less than a last resort because he believes that, though the tax would raise revenue, the counter effect would be would be disastrous.

Gatewood explained that he believes should the tax on cigarette and tobacco be raised, it would drive consumers to travel to Missouri or Oklahoma to avoid paying the tax. This would, cause retailers to lose money and force them out of business, and the state would lose the taxes paid from those businesses.

As an alternative, Gatewood said he believes in a change in the income brackets. Currently, Kansas operates with a three-tier income structure, but Gatewood proposes that adding more upper income brackets would raise more revenue for the state. In this system, a \$250,000 income would warrant a higher tax rate than a lower income.

There has been numerous ways discussed by the Kansas Legislature on how to save money without making more damaging cuts. Representative Joe McClelland has proposed a bill that mandates all school districts to have a minimum of 10,000 students. Larger class sizes have also been mentioned.

A pending Federal program called *Race to the Top* would bring up to \$175 million to spend on Kansas education. However, it is not definite if Kansas will sign on to the program. In the *Race to the Top* program, teachers would receive merit pay, which means that they would be paid based on student performances. The majority of the merit pay would be based on state assessments. Subjects such as music and art do not receive state standardized testing.

“I’ve always opposed merit pay...you get paid based on how good a job you do. I don’t think there is a good way to measure how good of a job certain professions can do when you do not have the same raw materials into that profession...everybody has their own specific area that excel in and you can’t expect [every student to be perfect.]”

Time will only tell what will happen with the budget crisis. “From the beginning, Kansans have always been dedicated to the proposition that a quality education was the right of birth of being in this state...the education you receive, the education you pursue will determine the strength of our state, the strength our nation and the strength of our world,” said Stacy Parkinson, first lady of Kansas.