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The financial forecast for the upcoming school years looks stormy, with a major possibility of more budget cuts in the Johnson County area.

With \$187 million already cut from state aid for K-12 education, state legislators are debating the best course of action for Kansas schools.

"If there's ever a year when the legislature needs to be working hard to make tough but good, safe policy choices, it's right now," Rep. Pat Colloton said. "It isn't just 'should you cut, or should you build revenue.' You can also change policies that come out with better results and that's what you really want to maximize."

Colloton said the Johnson County school districts, including Blue Valley, Shawnee Mission and Olathe, do not receive as much state aid as other districts throughout the state.

"Education [K-12] is half the budget of the state and we in Johnson County don't get our fair share," Colloton said. "If they want us to continue to support schools across the state, as we have always done, we are going to have to get an adjustment here for Johnson County for this coming fiscal year."

Because of the proposed budget cuts in the Johnson County area, programs are looking for alternate means of funding. Mark Mosier, head of the art department at Blue Valley High School, feels the most difficult challenge in the upcoming school year be staffing for classes that are not a part of the core curriculum.

"It's doubtful our district will cut major funding for the arts," Mosier said.

"Potentially, the biggest problem could be finding sufficient staff members. If enrollment continues to grow and class sizes increase, it will not be easy to accommodate for everyone."

Unlike athletic programs or other extracurricular activities, the art department relies on two specific places for funding: the building budget and student enrollment fees.

"We receive a portion of the building budget, an amount that is allocated specifically for the arts," Mosier said. "If the building budget decreases, it's very possible our funding will be reduced as well."

Compared to other districts throughout the state, Johnson County schools receives a smaller amount of state funding. Shawnee Mission, Olathe and Blue Valley receive 8 percent of state educational funds, 4 percent lower than other rural or urban districts receive.

"We will be working hard with legislators across the state to prepare an overall spending proposal for schools that is helpful to their school districts, but is helpful to ours as well," Colloton said.

Consolidation of smaller districts is a proposed possible fix to the financial crisis. Majority House Leader, Rep. Ray Merrick, said consolidation conserves funding that would otherwise be spent on running multiple districts. Consolidation could focus funding on one large district. Merrick also said stretching schools' budgets will be key in the next two or three school years.

"The word around here is we've cut to the bone, we've done this, we've done that but there is no budget in the world that can't be cut some," Merrick said. "Education is certainly going to be on the table, that is our biggest budget item."

Merrick said simple changes within school districts could save large amounts of money and all districts across the state have been offered a free audit.

"It's free and if you're not hiding something why wouldn't you take advantage of it?" he said. "We had six school districts step up and say 'We'll do it.' They've done three

audits so far and found that one school district, Derby, could save over a million dollars just by changing their block schedule."

However, some feel school budgets are already cut to the maximum, and an alternative must be found for Kansas schools.

"The governor has, month after month after month — the entire time that he has been governor — had to make significant budget cuts to the extreme that he is noted as being the governor who has cut the budget more than any other governor in our history," First Lady of Kansas Stacy Parkinson said. "That is not a fun thing to have on your shoulders."

Director of Legislative and Political Advocacy for the Kansas National Education Association, Mark Desetti wonders where further cuts could be made.

"We are beyond fat, we are now hitting muscle and bone," he said. "If we can cut more, as they say we can, tell us where that is. They don't have an answer for that."

In the State of the State address in January, Gov. Mark Parkinson proposed a one-percent sales tax increase in addition to the 5.3 percent tax all ready in place. Parkinson also proposed a hike in cigarette taxes from \$.79 a pack to \$1.34 a pack. The revenue produced from the taxes could potentially help ease the financial pain felt by every district.

Colloton said she's received requests from parents within the Johnson County districts asking for tax increases.

"I've received some [e-mails] and they've been to the effect, 'Pat, please raise my taxes. I want to see our schools fully funded,'" she said. "Nobody wants to increase taxes, I understand that, but what these parents are saying is, 'We will grin and bare it, do not cut schools.'"

Although the tax increases could boost revenue for education, some officials are hesitant to increase taxes for fear of public opposition.

"We have a spending problem, we don't have a budget problem," Merrick said. "The thing we've got to be cognizant of is Missouri. We live real close to Missouri and their [tax] is a lot less than ours. The revenue that they think we're going to get out of that could diminish because people will shop in Missouri. It doesn't solve a lot of our problems."

No matter which stance officials take on the financial situation, all agree there is no easy solution. All legislators are advocating measures the public can take to raise state revenue.

"If I was you, I'd want to know, 'What can I do? What can I do to make a difference?'" Representative Barbra Bollier said. "You can go and tell your friends: buy in Kansas, buy in Kansas. We have all these options on the Internet and you don't have to pay sales tax. But guess where that money is going; it's going to your schools. We need that. So don't go across the state line, stay right here and help us all support our self."

The forecast for the financial situation of Kansas schools does not look sunny, at least for another two or three school years, according to Colloton.

The biggest consensus among government officials is the importance of educational success for Kansas students, and the continued level of excellence, despite the current financial shortfalls.

"Every student in Kansas has the right to the same quality of education," Rep. Marti Crow said. "It is our state's constitutional duty for the legislature to make sure that everyone of you gets a good education and has all the advantages as far 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."