

District tackles budget crisis

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***note: in order to encourage readability, the reporter and designer broke up the story into smaller sections, indicated in bold type.**

Call it the trickle down effect. The state's budget crisis finally made its way into everyday school life this semester. Now students, teachers, district officials and state legislators must deal with the consequences.

Background on the Budget Crisis

The recession has resulted in limited state funding, forcing cuts throughout the state. Under legal obligation, the state must fund schools while at the same time keeping a balanced budget for all state funded programs. According to the Kansas City Star, roughly \$170 million have been cut from the state's public education budget this year in order to help balance the budget.

Sen. Anthony Hensley, a Democrat of Topeka, believes more funding for education is needed.

"K-12 education cannot sustain any further cuts," Hensley said. "We are going to do everything we can to make sure that doesn't happen."

District director of budget and finance Ken Larsen estimates that \$4 million has been cut from the district budget this school year. Roughly 80 percent of district funding must be used for payroll, forcing cuts to be made to the remaining 20 percent of funds which includes classroom and extra curricular funds.

Rep. Anthony Brown, a Republican of Eudora, believes it was necessary to cut money from education.

"The problem is that funding K-12 education is over 60 percent of the [state] budget," Brown said. "It's more of a spending issue than a revenue problem. We have been misspending for the past five years."

Immediate Effects of Cuts

The effects of cuts to education are just starting to be felt at building levels across the district.

In previous years, teachers were allotted a certain amount of money per year to spend on classroom items. Starting second semester, teachers must now seek approval from Principal Dr. Joe Novak, who was asked by the district to cut 60 percent of this year's remaining building funds.

"We've cut the autonomy out of it," Novak said. "I've made it clear to make sure we have the money we need, but now teachers can only ask for the things they absolutely need."

Commitments that have already been made to clubs, sports and teachers concerning money will be honored. In the future, staff will find it harder to receive money for things that are not deemed absolutely necessary.

For band teacher Debra Steiner, the budget cuts are starting to add up.

"I tried to stretch music as much as I could," Steiner said. "With us growing, I'm going to need more instruments, but I'm trying to make things work."

Librarian Andy Shelly has had to 'put off' replacing worn books and has also refrained from buying new fiction books.

Although teachers shouldered the largest hit, students are beginning to feel subtle impacts as well.

"We don't get to go on field trips," junior Angela Chu said. "We used to go take a field trip every year to a French restaurant."

In the future the cuts could start to affect students more drastically.

"We haven't felt those earthquake tremors yet because people have done a good job of spreading out the money so it's not affecting students," Novak said.

The Future of the District Budget

Future legislation and budget cuts will determine how severely students could be affected in the upcoming years. According to Hensley, an additional \$187 million cut from education has been proposed for next year. Larsen says the district could lose an additional \$2.2 million, although nothing has been determined at this time.

In order to make up for reduced funds, the district is seeking new ways to save more and generate funding.

"With declining state revenue, public schools must find ways to become more efficient, and essentially do more with less without sacrificing the quality our parents and students have come to expect," district director of community relations Alvie Cater said via e-mail.

Cater said the district will evaluate staff work hours, explore early retirement incentives and look at possible staff reductions. Summer school staffing, curriculum, facility, teacher conference registration, substitutes, travel, utility use and an increase of student enrollment fees are all ways the district is considering to save money.

The school will look at athletic and extra-curricular activities as a place to possibly have cuts.

"Unless things get better, there will only be varsity, junior varsity and freshman level [teams]," Novak said.

Cuts will likely affect all school programs in some way, shape or form.

"Hopefully this gets fixed in future years," Chu said. "If not, students won't be able to learn to their potential."

The Future of the State's Budget

Legislators will continue to examine ways to make up for the deficit during the current session, which ends in April. Hensley reports a higher tax on tobacco, a so-called sin tax, could be one way the legislature will generate money.

Hensley said that the state will examine tax-exempt organizations such as churches, and look at charging temporary income taxes or refining the process in which a tax exemption is given in order to generate more income. Other ideas include a raise in sales tax, as well as locking in money when state revenue is up in order to have more money when revenue is down. Regardless of the solution and facing declining revenues, legislators will have their work cut out for them.

Although schools could face challenges in the future, the district is doing its best to stay positive.

"Something good always comes out of a challenge like this," Novak said. "We are practicing more conservative use of resources so that there may be less waste. Let us all work together in the best interest of our purpose, which is to provide the very best we can each and every day."