

School Funding Likely to Change

During his campaign, Governor Sam Brownback indicated that one of his priorities would be to overhaul the manner in which Kansas schools are funded. In mid-December, the Governor's office formally released his plan for making that happen. Although there are many aspects of the Governor's plan that still need to be finalized, it is very apparent that a greater emphasis will be placed on the local property tax effort.

This shift in emphasis has generated concern on the part of school leaders and moderate legislators, and rightly so. This concern stems from inequities in the ability for districts to raise funds locally. School districts with low property values will have difficulty raising the funds necessary to operate their schools, requiring significant increases in the local mill rates. School districts with high property values will have a distinct advantage as each mill levied will raise considerably larger sums of money.

To fully explain the Governor's plan is a difficult task so I will just mention some of the highlights and how this could affect the Wheatland school district. One of the major components of the proposal is a "hold harmless" clause, meaning no district will receive less money than they did before the plan goes into effect. Unfortunately, schools are currently significantly underfunded – state funding for schools is 16% below what is required by current law. Of the 289 school districts in Kansas, 144 would receive no new money under the Governor's plan and could only increase their funding through an increase in the local mill levy.

How would the Governor's plan impact Wheatland? If this proposal passes as is, our district will benefit greatly. USD 292 is one of the 145 districts that will receive an increase in funding. Additionally, since we already have a significant level of local effort in place, we are in position to receive increases of approximately \$75,000 each of the first four years of the new plan. As the district financial officer, it is very difficult to not be supportive of a plan that puts that much more money into our school system.

As mentioned earlier, the Governor's plan has created concern on the part of moderate legislators. As a result, moderates have announced an alternative plan that will become part of the discussion during this legislative session. Their proposal revolves around the concept of providing adequate funding to the current law. Although Wheatland would not receive the substantial increases the Governor's plan would provide, their alternative has a great deal of merit. Current law has already been upheld in the courts as being constitutionally valid. Although there is an active lawsuit at this time, it relates to the adequacy of funding rather than the equality of funding. By statute, Wheatland should be receiving approximately \$200,000 more in state funding than is actually provided. If the legislature can put itself in a position to fully fund schools, everyone would benefit.

A second component of the moderate plan does not directly affect schools, but would be very beneficial to local tax payers. Moderates are proposing to begin re-funding the Property Tax Relief Fund. This fund provides money to cities and counties to help reduce local property taxes. It has been unfunded since 2002, contributing to a dramatic increase in local property taxes across the state of Kansas. A degree of relief from local property taxes would be very welcome in Western Kansas.

How this will play out in the legislative session is difficult to predict. The Governor's plan is likely to face strong opposition in the Senate while the moderate's plan will meet resistance in the House. It must be hoped that common sense and a desire to do what is right for Kansas kids will win out in the end.