



## Other Viewpoints

### School districts face hard choices

Some legislative leaders are recognizing the need to raise taxes to avoid devastating budget cuts to schools and social services, with Senate President Steve Morris, R-Hugoton announcing Friday that he would push a \$300 million tax plan.

But given that many other lawmakers are still stubbornly opposed to any tax increase, school districts would be wise to prepare for the worst.

The Wichita School District fears that it might have to cut \$25 million from next year's budget on top of the \$34 million the district cut this year. It held public forums in February to get ideas on what people value in local schools and where the district might cut.

Officials explained that cutting that much money is difficult because the majority of the district's budget is restricted for specific purposes. Only 40.5 percent of the total budget, or about \$251 million, is unrestricted.

Within that budget slice, 80.9 percent goes for salaries and benefits of employees. And it is nearly impossible to find \$25 million in cuts from the remaining 19 percent of the unrestricted budget....

Thus the district would need to eliminate some people to make such a large budget cut. That could result in larger class sizes and fewer teacher aides, which could undermine efforts to raise achievement and meet the requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind law.

The district also might need to renegotiate next year's contract with the teachers' union. To its credit, the union agreed to a contract for this school year and next that froze salaries and cut one teacher training day. But a salary cut also might be needed.

The district increased salaries by 10.25 percent for the 2006-07 school year, in part because it added four days of training. The district and the union might consider eliminating three more days of in-service training — which many teachers consider a waste of time anyway — in exchange for a small pay reduction. A 1 percent pay cut would save the district about \$3.3 million.

That would be a painful decision, given that teachers work hard and deserve more pay. On the other hand, the district approved previous pay increases — including a 6.5 percent increase in 2005-06 and a 4 percent increase in 2007-08 — based on promised money from the Legislature. The state has reneged on that court-ordered agreement.

Other options might include going to a four-day school week, as some rural districts have done; eliminating or charging for all-day kindergarten; and closing alternative schools. But there are significant drawbacks to those, too.

No doubt there are some changes the district could make to save some money without hurting student achievement, including cutting administrative positions. But they don't add up to anything near \$25 million. Cutting that much money — or even a third as much — could cause great harm.

— *The Wichita Eagle, via The Associated Press*

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155 W. Fifth St. (USPS 120-920) (785) 462-3963  
Colby, Kan. 67701 fax (785) 462-7749

Send news to: [colby.editor@nwkansan.com](mailto:colby.editor@nwkansan.com)

State award-winning newspaper, General Excellence, Design & Layout, Columns, Editorial Writing, Sports Columns, News, Photography. Official newspaper of Thomas County, Colby, Brewster and Rexford.

**Steve Haynes - Publisher**  
s.haynes@nwkansan.com

#### NEWS

**Kevin Bottrell - News Editor**  
kbottrell@nwkansan.com

**Andy Heintz - Sports Reporter**  
aheintz@nwkansan.com

**Marian Ballard - Copy Editor**  
mballard@nwkansan.com

**Vera Sloan and Aubrey Spencer - Society Editors**  
colby.society@nwkansan.com

#### ADVERTISING

**Heather Woofter - Advertising Representative**  
hwoofter@nwkansan.com

**Andrea Miller - Advertising Representative**  
a.miller@nwkansan.com

**Shaly Niemeyer - Advertising Representative**  
sniemeyer@nwkansan.com

**Kathryn Ballard - Graphic Design**  
kballard@nwkansan.com

#### BUSINESS OFFICE

**Robin Tubbs - Office Manager**  
rtubbs@nwkansan.com

**Evan Barnum - Systems Administrator**  
support@nwkansan.com

#### NOR'WEST PRESS

**Richard Westfahl - General Manager**

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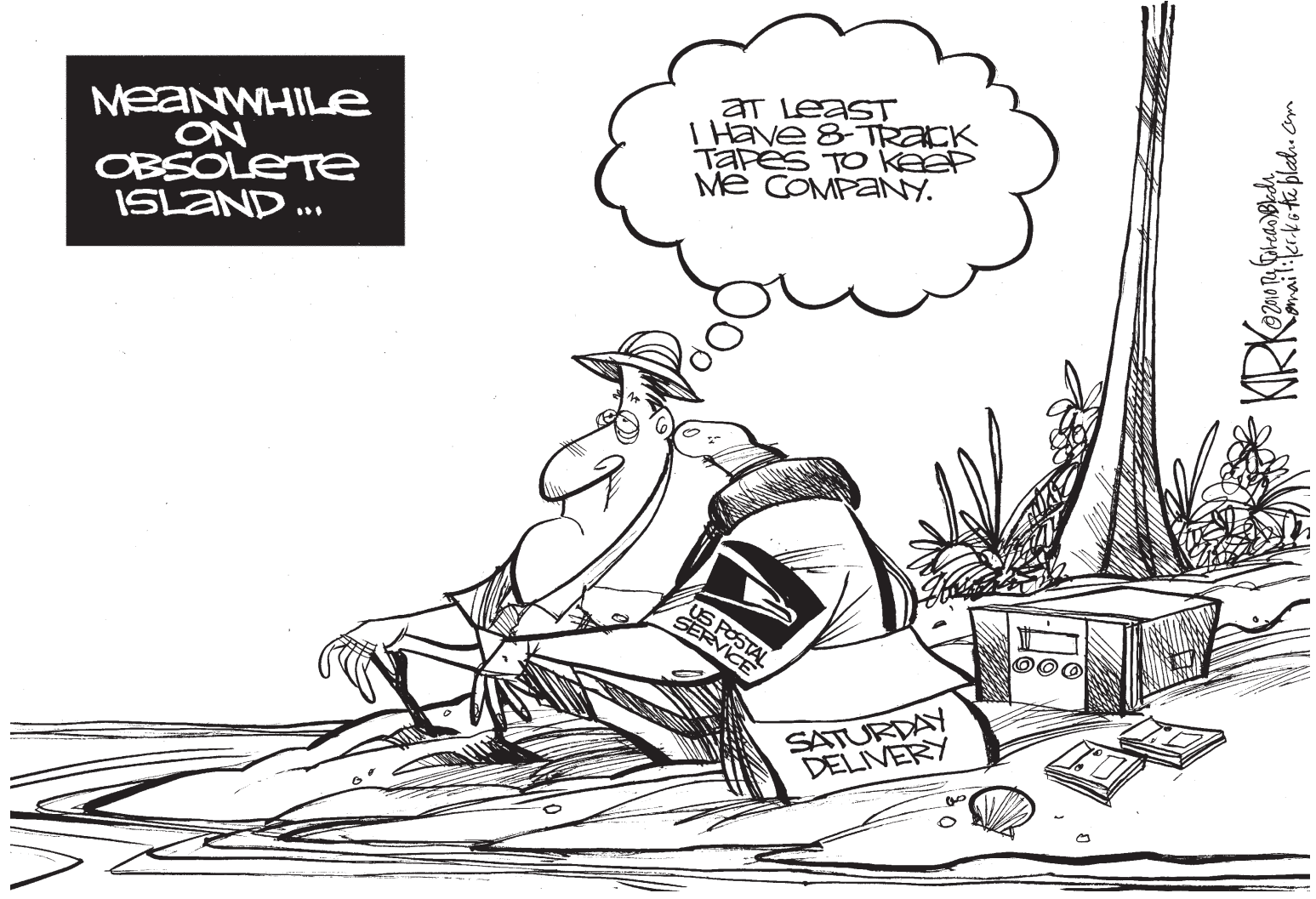
**THE COLBY FREE PRESS** (USPS 120-920) is published every Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, except the days observed for Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day and New Year's Day, by Nor'West Newspaper, 155 W. Fifth St., Colby, Kan., 67701.

**PERIODICALS POSTAGE** paid at Colby, Kan. 67701, and at additional mailing offices. **POSTMASTER:** Send address changes to Colby Free Press, 155 W. Fifth St., Colby, Kan., 67701.

**THE BUSINESS OFFICE** at 155 W. Fifth is open from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday to Friday, closed Saturday and Sunday. MEMBER OF THE ASSOCIATED PRESS, which is exclusively entitled to the use for publication of all news herein. Member Kansas Press Association and National Newspaper Association.

**SUBSCRIPTION RATES:** In Colby, Thomas County and Oakley: three months \$35, one year \$85. By mail to ZIP Codes beginning with 676 and 677: three months \$39, one year \$95. Elsewhere in the U.S., mailed once per week: three months \$39, one year \$95. Student rate, nine months, in Colby, Thomas County and Oakley, \$64; mailed once per week elsewhere in the U.S. \$72

MEANWHILE ON OBSOLETE ISLAND ...



### Don't let schooling get in the way

Much has been said about schools in recent days, and it seems to be the trend to equate schools with education.

Education, however, is far larger than formal schooling. It has even been regarded by some as the antithesis of schooling. Or as Mark Twain said, "I have never let my schooling interfere with my education."

The issue on the table, of course, is money. How much money do schools need? How much of their budget is expendable, and in what areas? Why does so much go into sport/music/busing/textbooks/salaries?

No one really debates the need for schools — they just debate the need for the (costly) elements which collectively comprise schools and schooling.

I'm not anti school, but the history of education in my own family points to a few interesting trends.

My maternal grandfather taught school for a time. His credentials probably consisted of an eighth-grade diploma and the blessing of the school board. This was not his ultimate career, of course. Eventually he moved up — to building homes.

His daughter, my mother, also taught school. Her credentials consisted of a four-year degree from a teacher's college and a teaching certificate. She taught for two or three years in tiny schools. She couldn't quit fast enough when her fiance's ship came in from New Guinea.

Her ultimate career included homemaker and office manager. She never stopped teaching, though, as can be evidenced by the knowledge I retain of poetry, famous quotations, and — to my newspaper colleagues eternal dismay



**Marian Ballard**

#### • Collection Connections

— English grammar and spelling.

Her daughter, my sister, was also a teacher, for about five years, also in small schools. She added a commute to the mix, at one point driving about 65 miles a day. She also quit. Her school ties continue, however, as she works in a district office.

Three generations of teachers, with ever-increasing credentials, and ever-increasing responsibilities. In the country school where my grandfather worked, his responsibilities were to teach the basics, and teach them well. By the time my sister taught in the 1970s, a teacher had to be part counselor, part social worker — and the job is even more complicated today.

It's true that there are more facts to learn than ever, on more topics. The sheer amount of information has grown exponentially in even the last five years, let alone 25 years or 50 years.

In an Internet search on the topic, I learned a new word, "exabyte," but not much else I could comprehend. In fact, too much information is worse than too little, because sorting out the necessary pieces become overwhelming. (Oh, an exabyte is a really, really big amount of digital information, something like a billion gigabytes. I don't remember — it just made my

eyes cross.)

Yet facts don't make us educated. An educated person is one who is able, and willing, to think for themselves. An educated person is one who can come up with ideas that are rational, practical, creative.

As we look at schools — and the money in schools — and the programs in schools — are we looking at what schools think is an education?

As anyone with a road map can tell you, unless you know where you're going, you really can't tell when you've arrived.

Who decides where schools are going? Who defines the bottom line — what an educated person possesses that an uneducated person does not? How clearly and publicly are these things stated?

Until everyone in the community knows what the schools think an educated person should know, the schools will be free to flounder around, without sharing its road map.

The big difference between Colby's schools in 2010 and my grandfathers country school in 1890? He knew, and everyone on the school board knew, exactly what was meant by an education in that district.

Yes, they taught to the test. They taught reading, writing, and arithmetic. They didn't teach computers, or social science, or home economics. New programs are not without value, but their value needs to be known and understood or it's not an education — it's just schooling.

*Marian Ballard has collected careers as counselor, librarian, pastor, and now copy editor for the Colby Free Press. She collects ideas, which are more portable than other stuff.*

### Celebrate agriculture this week

In case you hadn't noticed, agriculture provides almost everything we eat, use and wear in our daily lives. This industry increasingly produces fuel and other bioproducts as well.

Still, too few people understand and appreciate this contribution. This is particularly true in our schools today, where students may be exposed to agriculture only if they enroll in related vocational training — if it even exists.

March 20 marks the first day of spring. It falls during National Ag Week, March 14-20. This is a time to recognize and celebrate the abundance provided by this nation's farmers and ranchers.

National Ag Week encourages each and every American to understand how food and fiber products are produced, value the essential role of agriculture in maintaining a strong economy and appreciate the role agriculture plays in providing safe, abundant and affordable products.

It's during this period we at agricultural associations help those in our communities understand how food, fiber and renewable-resource products are produced. We must highlight the essential role agriculture plays in maintaining a strong Kansas economy as well as our U.S.



**John Schlageck**

#### • Insights

Kansas Farm Bureau

about agriculture, newspaper ads, farm tours, ag implement dealer tours and farm and ranch safety.

All of these activities are intended to increase the knowledge of agriculture and nutrition among today's consumers to help them make informed choices about diet and health. Informed citizens will also be better able to participate in establishing the policies that will support a competitive agricultural industry in the country and around the world.

A few generations ago, most Americans were directly involved in — or had relatives or friends involved in — agricultural-related endeavors. Today, that's no longer the case.

That's why it is so important we join together on this special week devoted to telling this unparalleled success story. Remember, celebrate agriculture this week.

It's truly amazing.

*John Schlageck of the Kansas Farm Bureau is a leading commentator on agriculture and rural Kansas. He grew up on a diversified farm near Sequin, and his writing reflects a lifetime of experience, knowledge and passion.*

#### Where to write, call

**U.S. Sen. Pat Roberts**, 109 Hart Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510. (202) 224-4774

**U.S. Sen. Sam Brownback**, 303 Hart Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510. (202) 224-6521

**State Rep. Jim Morrison**, State Capitol Building, 300

SW 10th St. Room 274-W, Topeka, Kan. 66612. (785) 296-7676 e-mail: [jmorriso@ink.org](mailto:jmorriso@ink.org)

**State Sen. Ralph Ostmeyer**, State Capitol Building, 300 SW10th St., Room 225-E., Topeka, Kan. 66612, (785) 296-7399 [ralph.ostmeyer@senate.state.ks.us](mailto:ralph.ostmeyer@senate.state.ks.us)

#### Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

