

Other Viewpoints

Tax hikes seem 'almost inevitable'

When the Legislature gavel in again in Topeka late this month and finally faces the reality of the state's revenue mess, lawmakers may have to get over their fear and loathing of all tax hikes in a hurry.

It's true that state revenues finally didn't disappoint in March, and the unemployment rate is heading in the right direction. Perhaps the latest state revenue estimates due Friday will further raise hopes.

But three months after Gov. Mark Parkinson laid out a bleak scenario and his proposed solutions in his State of the State address, the fiscal 2011 budget still looks bad, the fiscal 2012 budget threatens to be worse, and his ideas seem reasonable. To fill a \$400 million-plus budget gap, he proposes a 55-cent-per-pack hike in the cigarette tax and a 1 cent, three-year sales-tax hike.

He talked up those ideas again last week in a meeting with *The Eagle's* editorial board, noting the tobacco increase would bring Kansas to the national average and that the temporary sales-tax increase, like Sedgwick County's recent 30-month arena tax, would be unlikely to harm the economy.

"I don't think people will notice when the (sales) tax goes on, and I don't think they'll notice when it goes off," Parkinson said. "But the reward that we'll get is that — unlike other states that are dismantling their public school system and not funding their universities and not funding their retirement systems — we'll be able to keep things going at this minimal level. And then as the economy rebounds and we get our normal revenue growth, we'll be able to get these programs back on their feet. That just seems to me to make sense."

As he said, it's been encouraging to see bipartisan support in the Legislature for rescinding the 10 percent Medicaid cut the governor so reluctantly made Jan. 1, and to see public opinion polls favoring higher taxes to pay for Medicaid and strongly opposing more cuts to social services for the elderly and people with disabilities.

"It says good things about Kansans," Parkinson said.

It also says, along with polling showing strong support for public schools, that Kansans can see and feel the effects of \$1 billion in multiple rounds of state budget cuts in their communities and lives, and that they don't want to see more.

The governor — serving in a job to which he wasn't elected and having sworn off the fall election — is free to advocate what he sees as best for Kansas, rather than what will best serve a campaign.

"I don't want to raise taxes.... Unfortunately, the economy doesn't give us that luxury," he said.

When lawmakers begin the wrap-up session April 28, they will have to decide whether Kansas should start the economic recovery from where it is — at what Parkinson calls a "very sparse level" of state spending, after painful cuts to education, social services and transportation — or whether they want to keep cutting, whatever the consequences.

— *The Wichita Eagle, via The Associated Press*

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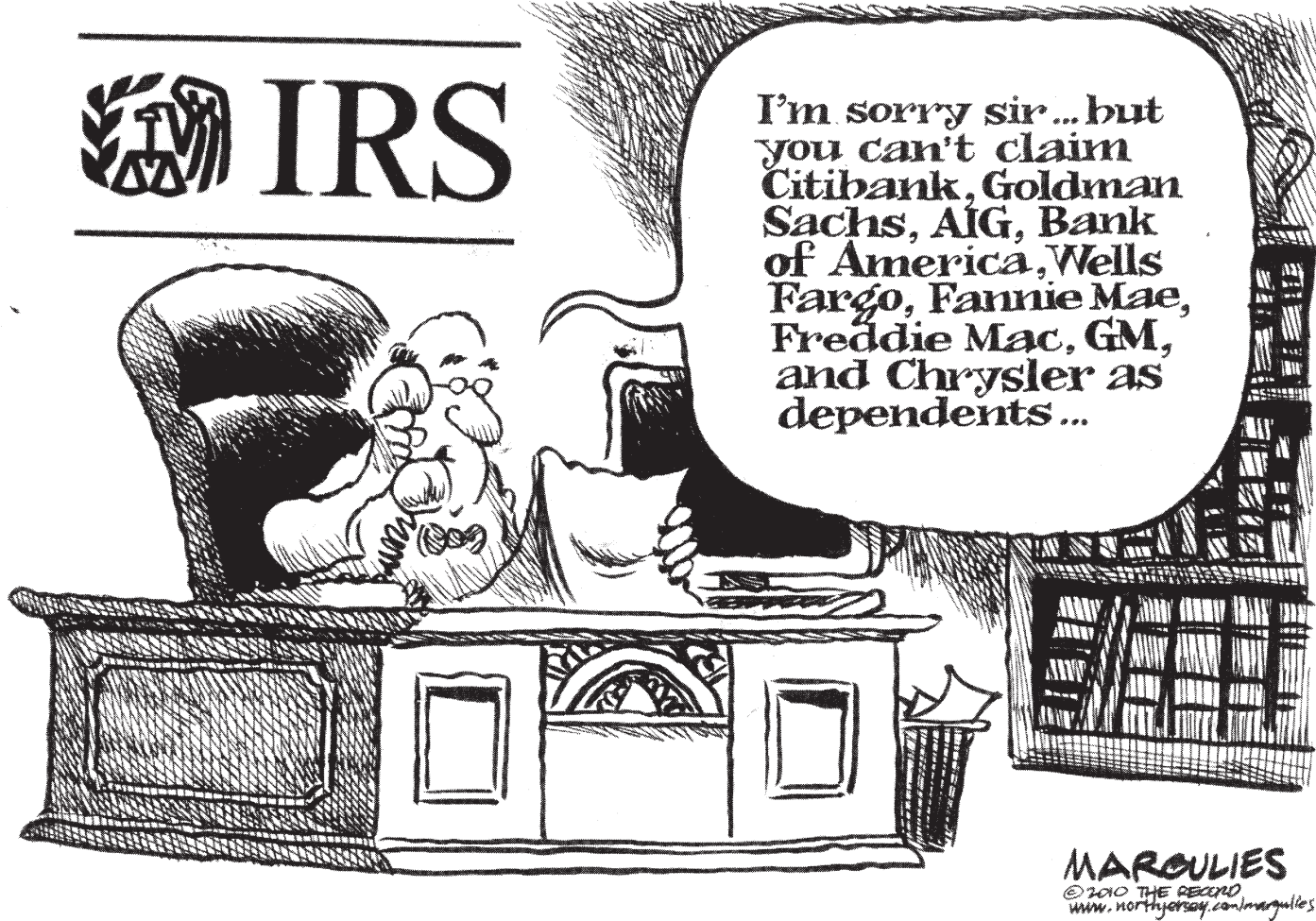
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Education crossing the Rubicon

"Education is a pendulum; it will swing back" is a common statement from veteran teachers.

It is true that many education "reforms" seem to rise from the grave. The current push for individualized intervention is a rerun of the failed diagnostic teaching and individualized education reforms of the late 1960s. But if we are coerced into adopting a common core curriculum, it will never swing back in our lifetime. We will have "crossed the Rubicon."

For those not familiar with this phrase, when a victorious Julius Caesar returned from Gaul with his troops, and crossed the river Rubicon into Italy against orders, he committed himself to a deadly course of action from which he could not turn back. Why do I consider a national curriculum to be so dangerous to American education? And why couldn't we easily withdraw?

I saw a national curriculum in Hong Kong in 1977. I taught at the American high school, where we had a standard U.S. curriculum. As professional teachers, we decided what, when and how to teach. Biology classes were expanding. We needed to hire a local teacher. "Local hires" came from British system schools, where every biology teacher in the Commonwealth was on page 24 of the Nuffield syllabus on day six of school.

I remember being in the office when we hired the British teacher. Her first question was, "What syllabus must I use?"

"You decide what to teach," I replied. (Panicked)

"What textbook must I use?" was her next



John Richard Schrock

• Education Frontlines

question.

"You can pick from any high school biology textbook," I answered. (More panic!)

We reduced her distress by giving her a first-period planning period so she could observe my American-style class.

It took her over a semester to break away. She was a scuba diver and we encouraged her to take her classes down to the beach to teach to her strengths. By the end of the year, I asked her how she liked teaching in an American school.

"I could never go back to the assembly-line teaching," she said.

She excited her students in marine biology and involved them in small research projects that never occurred at King George V High School. She now understood why American students were more questioning and creative because her teaching was no longer directed to test preparation and memorization.

Today, I travel each summer to China where they also have a national curriculum. Every teacher aligns their courses with the "gao kao"—the all important leaving exam. Scores on that test determine a student's life. To use educationist terminology, it is "total assess-

ment" of the student, the teacher, the textbook and the school. And the current scoreboard of Nobel Prizes to Chinese educated in China and researching in China stands at zero. America has over 270, far outpacing all those countries with national curricula.

China realizes the teach-to-the-test system leads to memorization and prevents the creative and highly variable questioning that the professional American science teacher used to do. China wants to change, and the Shanghai sector removed biology from the "gao kao" test in the mid-1990s. Immediately, China's students (with the concurrence of parents) ignored biology to focus on other tested material.

Once we are caught in a national test-prep system, the whole system re-tools for memorization. Teachers have no need for, nor is there time for, creative questioning. Good teachers leave. New teachers do not learn the open questioning and research methods.

Singapore and China realize the price they have paid for test-prep schooling, and are struggling to get away from standardized curriculum. American educationists, ignorantly thinking they are doing something "new," are charging ahead.

The common core national curriculum is the Rubicon that we must not cross.

John Richard Schrock, a professor of biology and department chair at a leading teacher's college, lives in Emporia. He emphasizes that his opinions are strictly his own.

Indiana health plan could work here

Indiana Republican Gov. Mitch Daniels, who was director of the budget under President George H.W. Bush, is being mentioned as a possible presidential challenger to Barack Obama for the 2012 presidential race.

The reason may have less to do with his charisma than for policies which have allowed Indiana to weather the recession better than the fiscal nightmare facing most state governments.

One of Daniels' biggest innovations is encouraging state workers to use a Health Savings Account, which had decreased the cost of health insurance for state employees and has saved the state money. If every state in the country would follow Indiana's lead, the savings might be used to reduce deficits in other areas of state government.

In a March 1 *Wall Street Journal* editorial, Daniels highlighted the amazing savings which accrued to the state after adopting a Health Savings Account option for state employees. What started small, with fewer than 4 percent of state workers adopting the policy, has now mushroomed into more than 70 percent of the 30,000 Indiana state employees.

"Due to the rejection of these plans by government unions," Daniels writes, "the average

Other Opinions

• Gregory L. Schneider
Kansas Policy Institute

use of HSAs in the public sector across the country is just 2 percent."

Health care costs have plummeted as a result, both for employees and for the state. State employees have saved an estimated \$8 million as a result of moving from a more usual "preferred provider" plan to a savings plan. Daniels argues that while state salaries have stayed flat due to the budget, the plan allows employees to give themselves a raise by pocketing the difference in costs if savings are more than expenses. It also gives them investment income, as unused portions of the accounts rolls over like a traditional retirement account.

The state has saved \$20 million in reduced health care costs, the total costs amounting to about 11 percent less than if the state was paying for traditional health care.

Kansas has offered these accounts to state employees for the last five years. However, one plan offered is not significantly less than the traditional preferred-provider plans. If the incentives are not much greater than the more expensive plans and elected leaders in the state, such as former Gov. Kathleen Sebelius and current Gov. Mark Parkinson, do not make the plans a central part of their health care reform plans, then why should state employees embrace them?

There is no data on the number of state employees in Kansas who currently use these accounts, which could be a sign that few are participating. They should be encouraged to; support for the plans should come from the executive branch as one way of ensuring reduced health care costs and providing an investment in the future not only for state employees but for the fiscal health of the Sunflower state.

Kansas Policy Institute is an independent nonprofit organization. Its focus emphasizes education, fiscal and health care policy.

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