

Kansas lawmakers: Show character in budget choices



JILL TOYOSHIBA/Kansas City Star

Parents, students, teachers and others rallied this spring at the Kansas statehouse against deeper cuts to schools in the state.

Kansas lawmakers today will return to Topeka to confront choices that will define their character and the state's.

The legislators' paths are clear: They could make further budget cuts that would harm schools and universities and heap more hardship on disabled citizens. Or they could muster the political courage to selectively increase taxes and eliminate some of the state's many giveaways and favors to special interests.

Gov. Mark Parkinson and leaders of the state Senate are showing wisdom and decency by calling for measures to increase revenues.

If they prevail, they can begin to reverse a long spiral in which Kansas lawmakers have exempted nearly twice as much in sales tax revenue as the state takes in.

In contrast, the House Appropriations Committee claims it has prepared a proposed budget that is balanced and prevents previous planned cuts to public education and social services without raising taxes.

Those statements are deceptive.

Under the House committee's budget, schools across the state would be confronted by an overall shortfall of \$87 million. School boards, which already have weathered two years of cuts, would have to choose between denying their students a quality education or asking residents for a property tax increase.

The budget gives the appearance of restoring some money for the disabled through Medicaid dollars. But budget planners cut funding for disabled citizens in the general fund, meaning the state would make no progress in getting

services to citizens who have been waiting for years. Nearly 6,000 developmentally and physically disabled Kansans are currently in line for services.

One of those citizens is Emily Thomas, a Johnson County resident who copes with multiple disabilities. Now 26, she has been waiting since completing high school in 2005 for placement in a sheltered workshop or job-training program.

Thomas' mother has fading hopes for the fuller life she has long wanted for her daughter.

"I see this as a shameful thing," Cynthia Thomas said. "When they talk about these cuts to social services, it makes me embarrassed to be a Kansan."

The Legislature gave short shrift to disabled citizens when its revenues were healthy. Now, the House budget pits funding for the disabled against money needed for education. Cynthia Thomas recognizes the false choice in that equation.

"I want the people that are caring for Emily to be well-educated," she said. "So I support education, too."

Kansans are fair-minded citizens who want to care for vulnerable citizens and to support public education. But too many legislators are in the grip of a well-financed, politically powerful movement that encourages giveaways and recoils at any kind of tax increase, even on cigarettes and liquor.

Years of adherence to that philosophy has left the state's fiscal structure tottering and exposed. Kansas can't afford more cuts. Decency and common sense demand that legislators find new sources of funding, starting today.