

## **Status Update**

By Kansas NEA

KNEA on the Governor's State of the State: In all, the Governor's agenda could signal the end of vibrant communities and a healthy middle class across the state. The plan for the future of Kansas may well be one where our schools are underfunded and the quality of life in our communities deteriorates. -- by KNEA President Blake West

The Brownback vision for the future of Kansas is coming more clearly into focus with major policy initiatives proposed for the 2012 Legislative Session. While important details of those proposals are disappointingly slow to emerge, the impact of what we do know is even more disappointing for those of us who hoped our families could call Kansas home for generations to come.

The public schools in neighborhoods and communities across the state have been hard hit by the tough economic times of the past four years. While educators have done everything in their power to cope with fewer supplies, stagnant salaries, and larger class sizes, we have always held a hopeful vision that our students would soon regain their rightful place as a top priority for restored legislative funding. No such plan to revitalize our schools seems to be on the Governor's radar, though.

Instead of laying out a plan over the next few years to achieve funding called for by numerous studies of what our students need, the Governor hopes to set in statute a plan that will ensure that the state underfunds our schools permanently. Students that are "at risk," in poverty, challenged with special learning needs, or are so unfortunate as to have been born in a community without significant property valuation will all be early losers in this plan. But all districts will eventually lose out as the state shifts more and more of its constitutional responsibility onto local taxpayers.

The current Kansas tax code is actually one of the more equitable systems in the country. That will end with the Governor's proposal to drastically reduce the most important leg of the system - replacing the revenue from income tax with sales tax will increase the proportion of taxes paid by the average working person while benefitting the highest income bracket.

The tax cuts promised to the wealthy friends of the Administration are sure to attract a certain kind of employment opportunity to the state. Low-paying, dead-end jobs with no health benefits, no retirement contributions will provide no real future for economic growth in the state. Seeing the handwriting on the wall, employers like Boeing are sure to flee the state recognizing that the legislature is not committed to funding schools that can prepare students with the skills they need for high-paying, high-quality jobs in the high tech economy of the 21st century.

At the same time that our schools are set for perpetual underfunding, we now learn that the dedicated public servants who work in the patrol cars, fire stations, and classrooms of Kansas for comparatively lesser salaries than those in the private sector are to be rewarded for their sacrifice by setting in statute the underfunding of their modest retirement benefits.

Even though a major study group developed a plan in 2011 to fully fund KPERS and provide stability for generations of teachers, firefighters, and law enforcement officers, the Governor would dismantle that plan.

In all, the Governor's agenda could signal the end of vibrant communities and a healthy middle class across the state. The plan for the future of Kansas may well be one where our schools are underfunded and the quality of life in our communities deteriorates. Our children and our grandchildren may well be looking outside of Kansas for the kind of jobs and communities where they can raise their families. We can at least hope they will come to visit us from time to time.