pinion



Free Press Viewpoint

Finesse needed in applying cuts

State officials and legislators are telling Kansans to brace themselves for budget cuts, which we all know are coming.

With the Legislature and governor trying to trim nearly \$300 million out of this year's budget and \$1 billion from next year's, there are bound to be some painful changes.

Public schools took the smallest cuts, only about 2.6 percent, but already some of the districts which sued the state a few years back are talking about another lawsuit to force the Legislature to give them more.

How they can take your tax money and sue your Legislature to make you pay them more is, shall we say, just a little strange, but when there's money involved, people do strange things.

School boards and superintendents had plenty of warning, and most found room to squeeze something out of the budget. Students and parents will notice, though, when activities fees go up or programs like art and band, even sports, get cut.

Colleges don't have to just accept a 10 percent cut in state money. They can and will raise tuition, and tuition costs in Kansas already have shot up. Expect the cost of your kids' diploma to take another jump this year. A decision is expected this month. Regents' colleges are scrambling to find money to fix old

buildings, where needs are measured in hundreds of millions but where the Legislature gave only about \$7 million this Some agencies will cut a little here and there, and you'll

hardly notice it. Others will want to make their customers sit up and take notice. The state Historical Society, for instance, dealt with the cuts by, among other things, simply closing some smaller attractions such as the Cottonwood Ranch, a historic Old West sheep ranch near Studley in Graham County. The one employee was

let go and the gates padlocked, though the sparsely populated area needs whatever tourism it gets. You could argue that the need for state money is far greater in Graham County than in say, Topeka, but the ranch got the

ax. In the statewide scheme of things, it's barely a speck. Other agencies say they're trying to keep taxpayer needs in mind, even though that's obviously not the case.

The Supreme Court ordered layoffs for dozens of parttime workers in court clerks' offices across the state to save \$800,000. In Lawrence, where the Douglas County District Court lost four part-timers, the court clerk said the office would have to close over the noon hour because of the cuts.

Court Administrator Linda Vogelsang said she understood that this would be a hardship on people who could only come in during the noon hour, but there was nothing she could do. Apparently the 15 full-time employees either all go to lunch together, or don't get along well enough to schedule noon-hour coverage.

Undoubtedly, some of the cuts will hurt, with more to come that will hurt even more. The state has to live within its means, though, and with 63 percent of the budget spent on education, other programs are really suffering.

The Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services, the state's welfare agency, will limit the amount spend on funerals for the poor to \$550, down from an average of \$678. You have to wonder what they will cut out of the service.

But the budget must balance, and there's no end in sight to the current round of cuts. — Steve Haynes

Colby Free Press

155 W. Fifth St. Colby, Kan. 67701

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

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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,

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



Reading 'The Shack' might change views

In your mind's eye, if God appeared before you today in human form, how do you think He would look?

ALBUQUERONE SURNAL

Because I like to think of myself as an artist, I have always pictured God in the fashion portrayed by Michelangelo on the Sistine Chapel, as a larger-than-life older man with a long, white, flowing beard wearing a white gown and flying over the universe watching over us, protecting us, and delving out reprimands when we do something wrong.

However, my concept of God has changed considerably since I read the book, "The Shack," by William Paul Young. This New York Times No. 1 best seller suggests that if God was to appear to one of us today, he might come in the form best suited to each of us according to our experience, a form we might better accept. For instance, the protagonist, or main character, in "The Shack" had a terrible childhood with a father who was a drunk and



Marj Brown

Marj's Snippets

who beat him mercilessly, so God appeared to him as a jolly, overweight, African-American

This seemed rather strange. I assumed the main character was white since the writer writes that he was born to an Irish-American family, however, Jesus also appeared as a black man in this book. The Holy Spirit was no particular color at all; she just flashed in and out in all sorts of beautiful colors. But, now that I think about it, who wouldn't like to find God as this jolly, African-American woman who was constantly cooking up something delicious to eat and who would never punish us in any way? That would work fine for me.

While reading this book, I think I experienced every emotion possible from hate, fear, sadness, to joy, love, and happiness, and most of all, forgiveness. One thing that reading this book did help me with was understanding why God allows bad things to happen to good people who don't deserve them.

I would recommend that every one read "The Shack." I'm not saying you will completely understand all of it - there are still some parts that I am struggling with - but even so, I still am glad I read it. It might very well be a lifechanging experience. If you don't feel closer to God after you finish the book, I don't know when you ever would.

Marj Brown has lived in Colby for 62 years and has spent a good deal of that time writing about people and places here. She says it's one of her favorite things to do.

We need schools that produce

If your blood test comes back with bad results, do you address the problems it reveals or do you blame the doctor who interprets the

The U.S. Department of Education just released the latest long-term results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The assessment, an important diagnostic tool for measuring the performance of America's schools, did contain some good news. For example, reading and mathematics scores for 9and 13-year olds were higher in 2008 than they were in the early 1970s.

But there was also bad news. The average scores for 17-year-olds, students near graduation, were no better. And even with the improvements, many students aren't doing well: fewer than one in three students reads at grade level in the fourth and eighth grades, and the record isn't that much different in mathematics. Kansas scores are somewhat better, but still unacceptably low, with roughly half of all students at grade level in mathematics but only one in three reading at grade level.

When Education Week, the newspaper of record for people working in public schools, printed a story on the results, it quoted several analysts and experts, including Andrew J. Coulson, an education analyst with the Washington-based Cato Institute. Coulson said that the results "reveal a productivity collapse unparalleled in any other sector of the economy.

That article provoked a sharp rebuke from one subscriber, who described herself as "exritated not by the opportunities lost by high spite the fact that nearly all of its students are flinthills.org.

Other **Opinions**

John R. LaPlante Flint Hills Center

school students who graduate with an incomplete education, but by Coulson's reaction.

"That word 'productivity,' she wrote, "is a perfect indication of the fact that many conservatives look at education as if it were a manufacturing plant producing a 'product,' i.e. students.

The reader, who is a professor of education, called the comparison "terribly dehumanizing" to students.

Dehumanizing? If you don't like the word "productive," substitute the word "effective," as in ."Are schools effective in doing what we ask them to do, which is to educate students?"

The answer, unfortunately, is "not especially." Coulson, in a remark not included in the Education Week article, said that "at the end of high school, students perform no better today than they did nearly 40 years ago, and yet we spend more than twice as much per pupil in real, inflation-adjusted terms."

Can schools rise above mediocrity? Some do. The American Indian Public Charter School, in Oakland, Calif., is the fifth-highest scoring school in California. It's also among tremely irritated." Oddly enough, she was ir- the top 200 public schools in the country, de-

both poor and minority, two groups that usually do poorly in school.

And when John Deasy became the superintendent of schools in Prince Georges County, Md., outside Washington, he brought in changes that sent test scores up, even though half of the students are poor and many are immigrants.

So making school budgets bigger isn't the answer, but how leaders use the money available to them is important. Do they reward teachers for good performance and back them up when disciplinary problems arise? Do they set high expectations and cultivate a culture of "no excuses?"

Some public school leaders do these things, but many are unable or unwilling to cut through the red tape, and public bureaucracies are prone to protect their employees rather than serve the public. Leaders in public charter schools and private schools often have more room to maneuver, to the benefit of students.

No change in education will quickly, easily or painlessly lead to graduating classes of students who are equipped to face the challenges of universities and the work force. Money alone isn't enough. Getting rid of ineffective teachers and rewarding excellent ones would be a good place to start.

John R. LaPlante is an education policy fellow with the Wichita-based Flint Hills Center for Public Policy. A complete bio can be found at www.flinthills.org/content/view/24/39/, and he can be reached at john.laplante@flinthills. org. To learn more about the center, go to www.

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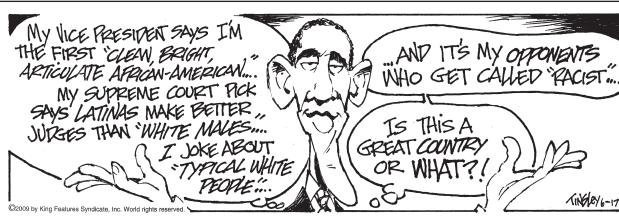
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