Acadiana school officials facing bleak fiscal future

By BRUCE SCHULTZ
Acadiana Bureau

School system officials in Acadiana say they face a disastrous fiscal future unless the Legislature comes to the rescue in the special session that begins Wednesday.

Gov. Treen announced this week that a 5.8 percent budget cut for every state department will be required without additional revenue to offset a $155 million shortfall.

But school boards have been coping with a budgetary dilemma all year, and a statewide budget cut for education would worsen the problem, according to school superintendents.

“We're biting the bullet and tightening the belt on everything already,” said Norman Romero, Vermilion Parish school superintendent.

He said more than half of the Vermilion Parish school system's $31 million budget comes from the state Education Department's Minimum Foundation Formula, which determines how much state money each school system is to receive.

The parish already has had to decrease its budget this year by $1 million because of a decrease in sales tax revenue and a drop in oil and gas receipts from minerals produced on School Board lands, Romero said.

The 5.8 percent cut would mean an additional $589,000 reduction for Vermilion Parish schools, he said.

“It would be disastrous,” Romero said.

But he and other superintendents noted that the Legislature earlier this year failed to fully fund the Minimum Foundation, having the effect of a 1.2 percent cut already.

Specific areas of reduction for Vermilion Parish schools haven't been detailed to cope with a 5.8 percent loss, but Romero said the most obvious solution would be a painful one.

“It would mean letting employees go, I guess,” he said.

The St. Martin Parish school system already has reduced teachers' salaries this year because of a drop in parish revenue by $500,000, said Burton Dupuis, St. Martin Parish school superintendent.

Teachers' annual salaries were cut earlier this year by $1,400, he said. The salary reduction dropped the parish's rank of teachers pay statewide from 13th to 48th, he said. Non-degreed personnel salary was cut by $1,000, Dupuis said.

The cuts were necessary after sales tax revenue and oil and gas revenue from drilling on parish land both fell short of projections, he said.

Dupuis said he has determined where additional cuts could be made, but he's not revealing what those possible reductions are.

“I'm not going to do it until I have to,” he said.

Dupuis said additional taxation is the only answer to the revenue problem.

Some good news has surfaced, however, with three requests to lease the board's 16th Section land for mineral production, he said.

He's confident the Legislature will come up with the necessary plan to raise additional money.

To allow the 5.8 percent cut for school systems "I think would be a gross injustice," he said.

Superintendent Wayne Vasher of the Lafayette Parish school system said he hasn't identified what could be eliminated to make way for another reduction in the parish's school budget.

Lafayette Parish has been hit hard by sales tax decreases since August of 1982, and was forced to trim its budget by about $500,000 this fiscal year. Salary cuts were considered, but the idea was dropped after the board decided, among other things, to stop paying employees' insurance premiums and not to grant pay raises for school employees.

Some of those cuts were required after learning the Minimum Foundation would not be fully funded.

Reducing the parish's Minimum Foundation Formula by 5.8 percent would cost $2.4 million, Vasher said.

"I haven't put the pencil to anything because I'm waiting for the session to be over," he said. "I just don't want to raise the anxiety level of our employees, especially before Christmas."

But Vasher said he believes the Legislature will avoid additional reductions in the education budget.

"I'm optimistic that our legislators are aware of the plight of not only our school system but the whole state," he said.

Superintendent Evans J. Medine of the St. Mary Parish school system said a budget cut now would be difficult to absorb, since the school year is almost half over.

Two alternatives would be likely considerations to deal with a revenue reduction, Medine said: a layoff or a reduction in services.

"It's awful difficult to reduce salaries in the middle of a school year," he said.

Like other superintendents, Medine is taking a cautious, wait-and-see approach to the possibility that less money might be coming to school systems.

"Right now it doesn't look good," he said.

He said a 5.8 percent reduction, combined with the Legislature's previous failure to fully fund the Minimum Foundation, would mean $200,000 less for St. Mary Parish this year.

The struggle for full funding of the Minimum Foundation occurs almost every year, with the Legislature usually making up the difference in the subsequent year, he said.

"We've been fighting that battle for quite a few years," Medine said.