BESSE approves extra funding

By JOHN LaPLANTE
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The Board of Elementary and Secondary Education Thursday approved spending an extra $16 million in state funds to pay for smaller classes and other educational improvements in the next school year.

The additional funds would be included in the Minimum Foundation Formula, the state’s basic aid program for Louisiana’s 66 local school districts.

Board president Felician Fourrier said board members and officials in the Department of Education must combine forces to ensure the formula is fully funded by the Legislature.

“Our strategy will be to try to present a united front,” Fourrier said.

Rather than argue over budget priorities in legislative committee rooms this spring, “We should settle it among ourselves beforehand,” he said.

Department officials said they did not yet have an exact figure expressing the total proposed spending for the 1984-85 budget year.

However, the Legislature appropriated nearly $1 billion for the formula for the current school year. The additions will add approximately $16 million, according to G. Byron Benton, associate superintendent of education in charge of finance.

The measure still must be approved by the Legislature, which has final say over state spending. However, under the Louisiana constitution, the Legislature can only approve or reject the formula. It cannot be altered once it is adopted by the board.

Major changes proposed for this year include:
- Increasing funding for kindergarten through third grade so that a teacher can be hired for each 22 students in those grades. The formula now provides funding for a pupil-teacher ratio of 24 to 1. The change will allow the hiring of about 900 more teachers at a cost of about $12 million.
- Provide 50 percent of the cost of operating school facilities — maintenance, supplies, materials, utilities and insurance. In the past the state has provided school districts funds based on $60 for each student. The change will increase funding for most school systems by a total of $4.6 million.
- Insert wording into the formula to ensure that it is fully funded every year. In the past the Legislature has often allocated a specific amount of money that later turned out to be lower than the formula required.

The Legislature has always made up the shortfall the following year, but the board wants to insert language that allows the Department of Education to draw as much money as is necessary to fulfill the formula, instead of being limited to a specific amount.

In other action, the board installed Fourrier as its new president and Claire Roy Landry of Arabi as vice president. Ms. Landry served as president during 1983.

The board also heard a brief message from Education Superintendent-elect Tom Clausen.

“I hope education is going to take a turn for the better,” said Clausen, who defeated outgoing Superintendent J. Kelly Nix in last fall’s primary election.

“I’m going to do my best and I know you’re going to do you best,” he said. “We’ll see if we can get a commitment from parents, teachers and students throughout the state to do their best.”

Clausen takes office March 12.