Bese backs scaled-down school plan

By JOHN LaPLANTE
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A state board bucked the angry school establishment's demand for the status quo Tuesday and instead kept alive Gov. Buddy Roemer's scaled-down plan to shift more state aid to academics.

The Board of Elementary and Secondary Education voted 7-4 for a new, $1.3 billion public school budget that offers teachers a pay raise but reduces state funds for support costs, such as bus drivers and cooks, by about 7 percent.

The vote followed three hours of tense debate by sometimes sobbing board members who endured almost constant catcalls and a few threats from about 500 school employees who fear the cuts will cost them pay cuts or even their jobs.

The focus of Roemer's education program now moves from the board, which drafts the annual school budget, to the Legislature, which must approve it.

Roemer's much-compromised campaign to direct more state funds to the classroom could be blocked by any one of four legislative committees and the full House or Senate.

The budget shifts, as well as a companion plan to reward the best teachers and get rid of the worst, also rely on two major tax increases that are far from passing the Legislature.

Despite the compromises accepted by Roemer — until last week he wanted to cut support aid by 25 percent — school officials said they can't afford any budget cuts.

"We're going down the wrong road," said Bernard Weiss, superintendent of schools in East Baton Rouge Parish, which would lose up to $2 million in state aid for support services.

"The generation of more money is the answer, not the removal of monies from one sector and the transporting of it to another," Weiss said.

Other school employees asked the board to listen to a seemingly unanimous school community instead of
a powerful governor.

"When you vote the will of one person, it's called a dictatorship. Vote the will of the people," said Pat Cosper, transportation director for East Baton Rouge Parish public schools.

But some board members said it's time to change a troubled school system — even if they don't agree with Roemer's changes.

"I know in my heart that this will do violence to education in Louisiana," said board member Jesse Bankston of Baton Rouge — but he voted for the new budget anyway.

Bankston said the 5-percent-plus teacher pay raise and other improvements are worth the upheaval during the coming school year, while the board develops a long-term plan to "restore some sanity back to education in Louisiana."

The old funding formula lacks those improvements and "we can't go back to that," Bankston said.

Another board member from the Baton Rouge area, Carson Killen of St. Amant, said he opposes changes because his school constituents oppose them.

"I have yet to find anybody in the education community who's for this. Who is for it except for the governor?" Killen said.

Roemer spouts phrases such as "children first" and "bricking up" education bureaucracy, Killen said.

But, "Long after the buzz words . . . are gone, the superintendents . . . will be left to grapple with the problems," he said.

Killen also urged the board to heed two teacher unions, which argued against a pay raise for their members if it might cost other school employees a job or a pay cut.

"Why do we have to shove raises down their throat if they don't want it?" he said.

But members supporting the change urged the board to consider the students, not just the school employees, and to consider long-term education needs and not just temporary inconvenience.

"I don't care if they want it or not. I want it for the state," said Huel Perkins of Baton Rouge. "I shall be for the improvement of teachers, whatever you tell me."