BESE favors shift in state aid from wealthy to poor schools

By JOHN LaPLANTE
Capitol news bureau

Managers of Louisiana's public school system took steps Wednesday to start a massive shift of state aid toward impoverished districts and away from affluent districts that can support their schools with few local taxes.

The proposed formula would redistribute $2.3 billion worth of state and local school spending and add hundreds of millions more, a consultant told the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Despite its higher costs, most BESE members heralded the long-awaited formula as a way to ease historic inequities and offer a similar quality of schooling to students in poor and wealthy parishes.

"It's up to us to see that children living in St. Helena have the same opportunity for an education as children in Plaquemines," said board member John Bertrand of Crowley.

Board member Jesse Bankston of Baton Rouge said the state can no longer, in good conscience, continue its current formula for the Minimum Foundation Program, the basic state subsidy for public schools.

"The disparity between the wealthy and the poor parishes is getting greater," thus increasing the inequities every year," he said.

He urged the board to adopt the formula in principle and start phasing in the new budget by the 1991-92 school year. Most other board members agreed.

Board member Roy LeBlanc of New Orleans objected, calling the formula a "Sherwood Forest" scheme to rob from the rich and give to the poor.

"It's not the real...ability of parents of wealthier parishes to be responsible for parishes that don't have that kind of tax base," the board's only Republican member said.

He said some of the districts that might receive the biggest boost from the proposed formula recently have turned down tax propositions to support their schools.

John Augenblick, the Denver consultant hired by BESE to develop the new formula, said states have a duty — increasingly tested in the courts — to reduce large inequities in how their students are being educated.

At the same time, he said, even taxpayers in poor parishes should be encouraged — with the incentive of even more state aid — to tax themselves as much as they can afford.

Augenblick said his formula is structured to do both.

"If a district wants to spend a lot . . . the state is going to help out," he said. "But we won't help if it's so wealthy that it can do it on its own." For instance, the formula would deny all state aid to Plaquemines Parish, a district with relatively few

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students and more than enough mineral revenues to finance its schools.

On the other hand, St. Helena Parish, crippled with a tiny tax base to operate schools for a mostly poor and black student body, might expect a 41 percent jump in state aid under one scenario.

But St. Helena would have to increase its own sales or property tax rates to get the full increase.

East Baton Rouge Parish could expect a slight increase in state aid under the scenario selected by Augenblick to demonstrate the possible shifts his formula might produce.

To get that increase, however, East Baton Rouge also would have to raise rates for school taxes. Otherwise, the relatively affluent district could lose some of its current state aid over the next few years.

Augenblick's formula is so complex that it took him two hours to summarize it to the board.

It involves two tiers. One guarantees the same basic instructional aid for all students from state and local sources. The other offers extra state aid for poor and moderately affluent school districts that make an extra effort to raise taxes for enhanced school support.

The presentation included charts showing how his formula might bear on each district in the state, and on total state aid.

But Augenblick warned that the numbers, although appearing to be precise, are based on factors — such as local taxpayers' willingness to raise taxes — that are almost impossible to predict. He said the charts are only illustration of potential shifts in state aid.

Acting with unusual speed for a body that often discusses big issues for months or even years, the board, meeting as its finance committee, voted overwhelmingly to accept the formula in principle after Augenblick's two-hour briefing.

Ten of the 11 BESE members attended the committee meeting. A roll call vote was not taken but no one voted against the action.

LeBlanc and Marie Louise Smelings of Monroe abstained from voting.