Bese panel studies impact of changes

By JOHN LaPLANTE
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A recent change in the state constitution might have given the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education nearly absolute control of state aid to public schools — including teacher pay scales, a board member said Wednesday.

Jack Pellegrin of Houma said the board should use its new authority to direct more money into classrooms and end the guaranteed funding for non-academic expenses such as buses and secretaries.

The board's finance committee voted Wednesday to seek legal advice on whether Pellegrin's reading of the constitutional amendment is correct.

His and other board member's comments echoed Gov.-elect Buddy Roemer's campaign promise to spend more education money on academics — including big pay raises for teachers — and less on bureaucracy.

Colleen Andrus, Roemer's chief education adviser, told the committee that her own study panel will suggest ways to shift about $150 million of current state spending to instructional activities.

The constitutional amendment, approved by voters last fall, apparently empowers the board to set minimum salaries and decide which expenses will be included in the basic funding formula for Louisiana's public schools, Pellegrin said.

The new language allows the Legislature to override the board's decisions with a two-thirds vote.

But that's not likely because "you can always find 34 percent of the people in there (the House and Senate) who will...

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Two years ago lawmakers even cut the funding formula by 4.5 percent. That action is still the subject of a court battle.

A constitutional amendment designed to make it more difficult for the Legislature to cut the formula was adopted by the Legislature last year and overwhelmingly approved by voters in November.

Pellegrin, whose term on the board expires in March, said the new language appears to give the board almost full control of basic school spending.

Another outgoing board member, Milton Hamel of Shreveport, said the board could remove non-academic items such as bus transportation from the formula and thus encourage local school boards to handle those chores more efficiently since they must bear the costs themselves.

The savings could be used to boost teacher salaries or buy more textbooks, Hamel said.

Newly elected board president Keith Johnson of New Orleans was less effusive.

Before making plans to rearrange school spending, "you get an opinion and you see where you stand legally," he said.

support education," Pellegrin said.

The finance committee voted to ask the attorney general's office whether the Legislature or the board now has power to set minimum salaries for school employees, and to decide which items are included in the basic funding formula known as the Minimum Foundation Program.

The panel also voted to send a $1.077 billion funding formula to the Legislature for the 1988-89 school year.

Except for technical changes, such as including teacher pension contributions in the formula instead of elsewhere in the state budget, the formula is little changed from the spending plan for the current school year.

But board members reserved the right to make changes before the regular session of the Legislature convenes in April.

Since its creation in 1975, the board has held official authority to draft the funding formula, but in practice the Legislature and the governor have greatly influenced school spending.

The governor usually proposes pay raises and major school improvement programs. The Legislature passes laws setting teacher pay scales and establishing programs that are included in the funding formula.