BESSE releases $7.9 million from fund

By JOHN LaPLANTE
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Several long-awaited school improvement projects were postponed again and possibly killed Monday, victims of low interest rates and a political struggle for control of the so-called 8g educational enhancement fund.

Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education said the fund — interest earned on a recent oil and gas windfall — is too small this year to cover all the recommended programs.

Supporters of the rejected programs said some are vital to the future of Louisiana education.

The board, at a special meeting Monday, released $7.9 million from the fund to continue, extend or begin seven programs, including a study of the state trade school system, development of a high school graduation test and $57,000 for the board’s own administrative expenses.

But the board stripped away nearly half the money earmarked to buy more textbooks, refused to fund six projects ordered by the Legislature and postponed — possibly fatally — a program to help principals run their schools better.

“The probably have killed it, for all intents and purposes, for the rest of the fiscal year,” said Joe Rivet, would-be director of the Administrative Leadership Academy.

The academy and several other rejected projects have been in limbo since they were created, but not financed, by the Legislature during a halfhearted wave of school reform in 1984.

The windfall fund was considered the last opportunity to give life to the dormant programs.

“This means several of the school reforms of 1984 will go down the drain,” said Jackie Ducote, vice president of Louisiana Association of Business and Industry, which supports many of the programs.

“For instance, she said, a rejected program designed to help rookie teachers was the only feasible path toward a long-studied system for accurately judging the performance of Louisiana’s classroom teachers.

“There’s only so much money to go around,” explained board member Claire Landry of Arabi after the board’s decision.

Lower than expected interest rates left the board with $8.2 million to spend on the special programs through June. The state budget lists projects totaling $12.5 million.

The board decided to finance only the $9 million worth of projects it originally approved last summer, minus about $800,000 of an original $1.6 million allocation for more school textbooks.

Without debate, the board rejected all six projects that the Legislature added to the budget bill without consulting the board. A majority of the board decided the Legislature has no legal right to add to the board’s list.

The board also postponed action on the leadership academy even though it was on the board’s original list.

Board member Jack Pellegrin of Houma complained that the training program proposed for funding would be independent of the board’s control.

“They could do what they want to with the money,” he said.

Rivet said it’s probably too late now to start up the program this fiscal year, even if the board approves it at the regular board meeting later this month.

The oil and gas windfall, totaling more than $500 million, was locked into the state constitution by Louisiana voters last fall.

The principal can’t be touched, but the interest — divided between higher education and the public schools-trade schools is supposed to be spent on new programs to improve education.