BESE takes no action on Roemer plan

By JOHN LaPLANTE
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Confronted by angry school employees demanding the status quo, a state board Thursday decided to let the Legislature make the next move on Gov. Buddy Roemer's plan to direct more state aid to the classroom.

The unexpected inaction of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education could jeopardize the heart of Roemer's school improvement program.

But aides to the governor—who a day earlier had predicted board approval for his drastically overhauled school budget—said he's not worried about the snub.

"They apparently are just waiting for some signal" from the Legislature, said Stephanie Desselle, Roemer's education adviser.

The governor could not be reached for comment Thursday.

But on Wednesday he said he would stand firm on his plans to spend more of the state's $1 billion school aid formula in the classroom and less on other school expenses because "that's where learning takes place."

The board voted 16-1 against considering a formula, backed by Roemer, that would phase out state aid for non-academic expenses at public schools, eventually leaving the state responsible only for classroom expenses—teachers and books.

The board instead will wait and see if Roemer can convince lawmakers to reject the old, $1.1 billion formula, which the board sent to the Legislature for approval last February, keeping the right to make changes.

Only if the Legislature rejects the old formula, board members said, will they consider a new one.

"The battle is over there now," said board member John Bertrand of Crowley, gesturing toward the State Capitol, where the House and Senate are in session.

The board didn't even vote on a compromise, accepted by Roemer, that would leave bus drivers, cooks and other non-classroom workers in the formula at least for the coming school year.

Either new formula would have freed money for teacher pay raises, which must be financed before Roemer can begin his most important education program—paying more money

Three of about 100 school bus drivers who attended the House Appropriations Committee meeting take a rest during the proceedings.