The School Board voted Thursday to inform all of the nearly 7,000 employees in the school system that they may be without jobs before school starts. The general notice letters will be mailed to employees on Friday.

Board members and school officials said the notices have to be mailed to all employees because there is uncertainty as to which teachers will be laid off.

Recommendations that the driver's education program, the pilot reading program, the elementary physical education program and the elementary music program be eliminated have caused what board members call a "ripple effect" on all employees.

For example, if an employee in one of the areas to be cut is certified to teach in an area that is not cut, he or she may "bump" a less-experienced teacher. Because of that "ripple effect," and because of different interpretations of the Reduction In Force policy, no one is certain which employees may be laid off.

The board is facing the prospect of laying off employees because of budget cuts from the state and sagging sales tax revenues.

On a committee recommendation, the board voted 7-5 to give the general notice 18 days before the layoffs begin. The board's Reduction In Force policy requires a general notice to be given at least 30 days before actual layoffs are implemented, but a motion to follow the policy failed to garner the seven votes required for passage.

Superintendent of Schools Raymond Arveson said the 18-day notice was "adequate" in the face of "a worsened position than we thought we were in at the beginning of the summer."

"I don't want to alarm our employees who we don't have to alarm," Arveson said. "We're simply not going to lay off hundreds and hundreds of employees."

The general notice letters already were printed and waiting in the personnel office at the close of the board meeting.

"The decline in school revenues has made it necessary to reduce the school system's work force," the letter says. "At a regular meeting on July 31, 1986, the School Board made the determination that a reduction in force is necessary. This memorandum is the general notice that you may be in one of the categories where the board has determined a reduction in force is necessary.

"This general notice indicates the
Layoffs

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possibility of layoffs,” the letter continues. “There will be an 18-day period from the date of this general notice before individual notices will be sent.”

The letter also says the “situation may change,” and “additional retirements or resignations will reduce the number of employees to be laid off.”

The actual number of employees to lose their jobs is uncertain. Estimates have ranged from 54 to 191.

Donna Deshotels, chairwoman of the Personnel Services Committee that passed the recommendation for board approval, said it was unfair to give employees only 18 days before lowering the ax.

“I’d hate to see (the policy) amended the first time we have to use it,” she said. “You don’t change the rules of the ball game after it’s started.”

But member L.L. Hines said that giving the employees an 18-day notice is more fair than to have to lay them off after school starts, which would have been the case had the board given a 30-day notice.

“We’re trying to be fair to the people and the system,” he said. “Because of the ripple effect, we can’t put our finger on who will be out the gate.”

Frank Millican disagreed.

“We’re talking about being fair, but we’re being unfair,” Millican said. “If I were an employee, I’d want to work as long as I could. This is what we’ve been doing since the budget crunch. We’ve been rushing and rushing.”

Deshotels said the board was to blame for having to rush the notices.

“People are talking about ripple effect like we didn’t know it was coming,” she said. “We knew about it all along, and it’s our fault that we have to send out the notices this way because we didn’t deal with the ripple effect earlier.”

Later during the debate, Deshotels hinted that there may be some fat that can be cut from the budget to avoid laying off employees.

“I’d like to see us dig into the budget and find that money,” she said. “We can do it in an emergency if we have to, right? So, let’s do it.”

Joining Deshotels in voting against the notices were members Eva Legard, Robert Meador, Millican and Jim Talbot. Deshotels, Legard, Millican and Talbot, contacted after the meeting, said their intentions were to not send notices at all.

“We’ve got the money somewhere,” Millican said. “What happened to the $4 million surplus we had in May? What happened to all that money between May and July?”

Deshotels said she has some preliminary ideas of where the budget can be trimmed.

“I haven’t studied it closely yet, but I believe there are some funds that can be cut that won’t hurt classroom education,” she said.

Deshotels said her preliminary “hit list” would include discretionary funds, staff travel expenses and expenses paid by the board for field trips.

“The discretionary funds add up to $370,000,” she said. “That alone would save the elementary P.E. or the elementary music program.”