East Baton Rouge Parish school system spending has grown at 10 times the rate of increase in student enrollment and three times the rate of growth of the number of school system employees over the past five years, a comparison of annual budgets show.

Those budgets show that spending has increased 47 percent, student enrollment has increased only 4.4 percent and the number of employees is up 11 percent.

This year, the School Board is facing a $1.9 million deficit and has called a Dec. 11 meeting to find things to cut. However, Superintendent Bernard Weiss said about 90 percent of the budget is tied up in salaries and benefits, making it difficult to find targets for the budget ax.

Dick Eiche, executive director of the East Baton Rouge Association of Educators, said he intends to suggest that department heads go before the board and personally justify any spending increase over the previous year.

However, school officials claim their budget is a bare-bones one that only appears to be soaring because of new state programs.

Associate Superintendent Grady Hazel said most of the increases can be traced to two state mandates that came down from the Roemer administration — the Children First Act, which has given teachers three consecutive annual increases, and the requirement of a 20-to-1 student-teacher ratio for kindergarten through third grade. In both cases, the state provided money to make the changes, causing the school system's state and federal revenues to climb about 50 percent over the past five years from $91 million to $137 million.

During the same period, revenues from parish sources climbed 39 percent, rising from $61 million to $84.9 million.

Hazel said that most of the increase in parish revenues occurred during the 1986 fiscal year, when voters approved employee raises and a
Bailout tax to compensate for cuts in the state discretionary funds used for school support services.

Eiche said he realized that a portion of the soaring budget has been caused by a sorely needed teacher raise, but claims that the funding hike, like the past five years goes well beyond that.

According to school system records, allocations for instructional services over the past five years increased 26 percent from $85 million to $115 million. During the same period, the total number of employees in instructional services increased 16 percent to 4,344. In the revised 1990 budget, instructional services—which includes teachers but not principals and other administrative staff in the schools—account for two-thirds of the school system's overall employees, but only about half of the overall expenditures.

Eiche claims that many school systems across the country manage to spend 60 percent to 80 percent of their budgets in the classroom.

School Board President Jim Talbot said he favors spending more money in the classroom but is concerned that the system might be top-heavy with administrators because of a central office reorganization implemented by Superintendent Bernard Weiss last year.

During that shake up, top-level administrators like Donald Hoover, Donald Fisell and Jerry Epperson were relegated to positions with less responsibility but the same pay—and were replaced by others who received raises, Talbot said.

"These people were placed in dead-end jobs, but I don't consider them dead ends because they didn't elect to be where they are," Talbot said. "In most cases, I think they were functioning well, but for one reason or another didn't fit into Weiss' plans."

A comparison of school budgets over the past five years shows that the general control budget—which includes the superintendent's office and the board—has increased 26 percent from $1.3 million to $1.7 million in the revised 1990 budget. During the same five years the number of employees working in what is now the general control section has increased from 8 to 15, with most of the new workers coming in the form of a grant development section and extra clerical workers for the superintendent's office.

The administrative services budget—which includes principals, school secretaries and human resources—did not exist as a separate entity five years ago, but a comparison of comparable line items in the 1986 budget reflects an increase of 47 percent to $13.2 million, with the number of employees increasing from 368 to 396.

Allocations for what is now Business Services—which includes data processing, purchasing and finance—has increased 26 percent to $2.8 million, while the number of employees has remained at 72.

School Board member Donna Deshotels echoed Talbot's concerns, suggesting that Weiss had created a "Department of Non-Existing Services" to accommodate administrators who didn't fit into Weiss' new system.

She noted that the school system under Weiss has incurred extra costs by going above and beyond the state-funded allotment based on student enrollment. A recent report filed by parish officials with the Department of Education shows that the local system has 90 administrators and 246 teachers above the allotment that is covered by state funding. She said many of those positions are related to Weiss' redesign program, which attempts to encourage voluntary desegregation by offering specialized courses at certain schools.

Deshotels also claims that the redesign program also has been responsible for additional transportation expenses.

In five years, the transportation budget has grown 44 percent from $9.3 million to $13.4 million, with the work force assigned to that division increasing from 762 to 877. While some of the difference may stem from the redesign program, which in some cases buses children across the parish, at least part of the difference is the fact that no money was budgeted for replacing buses five years ago, compared with the $4 million for replacement budget in the current budget. In addition, allocations for the gasoline and fuel have risen from $92,402 to $1.45 million due to escalating oil costs since the Persian Gulf crisis.

Weiss emphatically denies the school system is top-heavy with administrators. In fact, he said that administrative salaries account for only 0.3 percent of the budget, compared with the national average of 1.9 percent.

And he denies that any top-level administrators have been pigeonholed into meaningless positions. As an example, he pointed to Hoover, who was previously in charge of instruction but is now the chief of research and planning, coordinating efforts to hammer out a strategic plan that is supposed to take the school system into the next century.

"Dr. Hoover is in one of the most dramatic positions in the system," Weiss said, noting that the strategic plan is "the key to everything we do."

Weiss pointed out he personally had nothing to do with the 1986 budget and did not start work as superintendent until the initial 1987 budget was already developed.

Hoover's department—Research, Planning and Support Services—did not exist as a separate entity in 1986. However, several of the functions were included in other departments at a total cost of $1.13 million and 41 employees. In the revised 1990 budget, allocations for Research, Planning and Support Services total $1.75 million with 52 working in 52 employees.

Weiss said that enrollment for special education students has risen dramatically in recent years, noting that the system has had to increase the number of special education teachers to keep pace. Enrollment is also up for regular students, he said, but conceded that in some cases, the system has exceeded the state allotment for teachers.

Weiss said one of the biggest problems with the budget in recent years has been spiraling "fixed costs," such as insurance, workers' compensation, retirement benefits and sick leave.

A comparison of budgets over the past five years shows that the system's fixed costs have risen 94 percent, increasing from $25.2 million to $48.9 million. Because of the increase, school system officials have had to eliminate denial benefits, which cost $473,999 in 1986.

Maintenance operations for the school system have increased by 31 percent over the past five years to $25.4 million in this year's revised budget, while the work force has slightly decreased from 784 to 761. Some of the factors responsible for the increased maintenance budget include an increased allocation for electricity (from $2.9 million to $4.1 million), for repairs to buildings (from $957,494 to $1.3 million), and for replacement of equipment (from $265,569 to $1.5 million). In addition, the system is facing expenditures for garbage collection ($810,000) and asbestos control ($300,000) that weren't included in the 1986 budget.