Board approves changes in school aid program

By JOHN LAPlANTE
Capitol news bureau

Education officials approved several changes in the state's $1 billion basic aid program for public schools Thursday, including one to reduce administrative positions for many school systems with declining enrollments.

A spokesman for the Task Force on School Finance, which recommended the changes, said the current system paid some school systems for non-teaching personnel whom they didn't need.

State and local officials said they couldn't determine immediately what effect the change would have on East Baton Rouge Parish, which had lost thousands of students in recent years.

But Grady Hazel, assistant director of finance for the school system, said he hoped other amendments made in the minimum foundation formula would increase state funding and make up for any possible losses in state aid next fall.

The Board of Elementary and Secondary Education approved the changes Thursday and sent them along to the Legislature, which has final say on state spending.

The formula bases state aid mainly on the number of students enrolled in a school system. For instance, a school system generally is given one teacher's salary for each 25 students. Administrators' salaries are granted on the basis of the number of teachers allowed.

For the last three years the formula has contained a provision that no parish be paid for fewer administrative positions than it employed the year before.

That means the East Baton Rouge Parish system could be paid for the same number of administrators it was allotted three years ago — even though fewer students are enrolled and fewer teachers are allotted to the system.

"Why are we paying for administrators that we don't need?" said Art Thiel, a member of the Task Force on School Finance and director of the Public Affairs Research Council, a nonprofit government study group.

Thiel presented the changes to a committee of the state board Wednesday.

Hazel said other changes proposed by the task force were supposed to make up for the loss in administrative funds. The East Baton Rouge system already is facing a $2.5 million deficit for the current school year.

The state board approved other changes that would increase state funds to local budgets.

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