Education cuts approved

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BATON ROUGE -- A subcommittee charged with cutting the state's education budget by $100 million came close to its goal but some members are not satisfied with the way it was done.

The panel sidestepped controversial cuts in private education by approving a 3 percent across-the-board cut to private and public schools. This change, like all the others approved by the panel, has to be approved by the Legislature to be enacted.

The largest cut to private education came in eliminating the $5 million reimbursement to families who transport their children to school. Although the money is available to all students, all but $1 million of it is paid to parents of private school students.

Baton Rouge Rep. Raymond Jeter complained that the committee was eager to cut public education but didn't want to touch private schools.

Co-chairman Rep. Jimmy Long of Natchitoches said the panel had cut $9 million in transportation and tax deductions and $634,000 in aid for several programs.

Jeter pointed to the almost $60 million in cuts to public education and said "With all due respect, whoop-dee-doo, Mr. Chairman."

Cuts totaling almost $12 million

more in private school aid were rejected. Included were: eliminating $4.7 million for school lunch workers, $4 million for administration and $3 million for transporting students to private schools.

The panel voted to cut the programs 3 percent.

Sen. Cecil Picard of Maurice said he favors cutting the Minimum Foundation Program (MFP), the formula which provides funds for schools according to enrollment, because it affects both public and private schools.

The largest monetary change approved by the committee was an increase in revenue for the state. The panel voted to eliminate the $25 per student deduction allowed on state income tax, which would raise $15 million.

Committee co-chairman Sen. Armand Brinkhaus of Sunset labeled the increase "a painless cut."

The committee set priorities for cuts: Category 1 - immediate savings; Category 2 - difficult but absorbable; Category 3 - to be implemented only in severe financial crisis and all cuts may be used as the price of oil keeps dropping.

The major cuts approved by the committee include:

* $29 million from the MFP.
* $5.08 million reimbursement for parents transporting their own children to school.
* $2.2 million in school lunch reimbursement. The state now pays 8.2 cents per lunch above the amount funded by the federal government, which pays for all lunches. The committee reduced to $2.2 million the proposed $9.4 million savings by eliminating state aid.
* $1.6 million by eliminating funding for extra instructional aides.
* $1.3 million by eliminating college and vo-tech bus routes to $2 per student per day. Any additional cost would be paid by students. The original proposal was to eliminate all.

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the state aid and save $3.2 million.

* $1.2 million by eliminating teacher aides in gifted classrooms
* $1 million for eliminating the double-counting of special education students that spend part of their time in regular classrooms.
* $504,600 by making food preservation centers self-sustaining.
* $500,000 by eliminating overfunding of special education transportation.
* $390,000 by cutting administrative and other personnel costs.
* $329,500 by eliminating drivers education.
* $293,658 by cutting funds for benefits paid at retirement.
* $299,500 by eliminating community education programs.
* $200,000 by eliminating two assistant superintendents.

The panel also endorsed the measures submitted by the Board of Regents for universities to raise revenues and cut spending.

Proposals members refused to consider include:

* eliminating $1 million for the Governor's Scholar Program (which has never been funded).
* eliminating $711,550 for the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana.
* eliminating $1.3 million for foreign language teachers brought in from other countries.
* eliminating $662,000 for professional development centers.
* cutting $9 million for utilities and maintenance of schools.
* cutting $1.8 million for summer employment of agriculture teachers.
* eliminating $350,000 for gifted and talented coordinators.