Education fund’s use debated

By CARL REDMAN
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A state legislator on Thursday suggested using money from a special education trust fund to soften the bite of the budget ax, but one of his colleagues said using the funds to supplant normal education appropriations would be breaking faith with the voters of the state.

In an effort to shield elementary and secondary education from some budget cuts, Rep. Francis Thompson, D-Delhi, said state leaders should look for a way to use earnings from the so-called 8g trust fund to shore up basic education appropriations.

If legislators had known the state was going to face such severe budget problems, they would have provided a way for earnings from the Louisiana Education Quality Trust Fund to offset budget cuts to the Minimum Foundation Program, Thompson said during a meeting of the Joint Legislative Committee on the Budget.

The MFP channels state funds to local school systems and furnishes about half of the operating revenue of Louisiana public schools.

Rep. Kevin Reilly, D-Baton Rouge, countered that the best way to meet education budget cuts is to get rid of unnecessary programs and not to talk about raiding trust-fund earnings.

Using trust-fund earnings for anything but education enhancement and improvement would “break faith” with the electorate that overwhelmingly approved the trust-fund amendment, Reilly said.

“We don’t have the guts, the political guts, to terminate programs that are no longer necessary,” Reilly said. “It would be a crime to break faith with the people now.”

In late September, voters approved a constitutional amendment locking money from a state-federal offshore mineral settlement in a special trust fund. The amendment says most of the interest earnings from money in the trust fund are to be split between higher education and elementary/secondary education.

On the elementary/secondary side, the amendment clearly says trust fund earnings cannot be used to supplant state appropriations to the Minimum Foundation Program, which supplies about half of the operating revenue for public schools in the state.

The philosophy behind creation of the education trust fund was to provide a continuing source of money with which to improve and push selected programs toward excellence.

But, Thompson said, it doesn’t make sense to be talking about enhancement and creation of new programs at a time when the state cannot properly support the MFP, which pays for many of the basics in education.

Thompson’s comments came when the Department of Education asked budget committee approval to spend $950,000 in trust fund earnings this year to hire 145 foreign language teachers.

Budget Officer Ralph Perlman said the plan to hire foreign language teachers calls for spending in half a year an allocation that was originally meant for the entire school year.

If the budget committee approves the request, the amount must be doubled in 1987-88 to meet a full year’s payroll for 145 foreign language teachers or the program will have to be scaled back dramatically. The committee deferred action on the request until next month.

Thompson argued the program should not be started, but that the state should find a way to use the trust fund earnings to help relieve budget cuts.

Perlman said the amendment forbids direct use of trust-fund earnings to supplant MFP money, but he said the Legislature could accomplish the same thing by shifting other education expenses to cover MFP cuts and then using trust-fund money to restore the other education cuts.

Perlman said that would take legislative action but the Legislature could do it with a budget amendment if a special session is called in December.