Higher ed officials relieved

By CARL REDMAN and KAREN DIEDER
Capitol news bureau

Higher education officials breathed a collective sigh of relief Thursday when Gov. Edwin Edwards said education units will have to cut their budgets 5 percent rather than the 10 percent being levied on most state departments.

But officials at the other end of the education spectrum took the budget-cutting news much less philosophically.

College leaders said 5 percent is better than 10 percent and were glad the governor will give them the flexibility to decide how the cuts should be made.

However, elementary and secondary education leaders were dismayed that education was not excluded totally from the cuts.

The governor said the Minimum Foundation Program, from which schools get most of their operating money, vocational-technical schools and handicapped schools will be cut 5 percent. But the Department of Education will be cut 10 percent, as is the director for other state agencies.

Joe Kyle, deputy superintendent for the education department, said the cut means some employees will have to be laid off.

The Louisiana Association of Educators President Shirley Williams said cutting education any further is “deplorable.”

Kyle said a 5 percent cut to the Minimum Foundation Program will amount to about $46.5 million. The 10 percent cut to the department equates to about a $3 million reduction, Kyle said.

“We can’t make it without layoffs,” Kyle said.

He said the cut to the department means up to 30 employees could lose their jobs, but Kyle said he’s hopeful to be able to make some reductions in other areas to avoid such a fallout.

“But in some budget units, there is nowhere else to cut,” Kyle said.

LAE officials are trying to arrange a meeting with the governor to try to talk him out of cutting education any further, Williams said.

When coupled with cuts handed down by the Legislature, elementary and secondary education stands to lose more than $100 million this year, she said.

“We are appalled by his action,” Williams said. “The 3 percent cut (Edwards proposed last week) was bad enough, but 5 percent is appalling. We have school districts who have already rifled (laid off) personnel because of the cuts. This will only make them worse.”

Williams last week threatened sanctions — including encouraging teachers to leave the state and warning businesses in other states of Louisiana’s lack of commitment to education — but Monday she said imposition of the sanctions rests on a meeting with the governor.

“We are waiting for an appointment with him prior to enacting or imposing any sanctions,” Williams said.

Williams and Edwards met Monday, but he said he’s waiting for their call to spare education further cuts, LAE leaders will then meet to decide what course to follow, she said.

Higher education leaders said they are disappointed that education must cut at all but said a 5 percent cut “beats the alternative.”

“I’m still depressed,” Commissioner of Higher Education William Arceneaux said after hearing of the governor’s plan.

“It’s going to be difficult for higher education to continue doing what we have to do in terms of offering quality programs.”

“I am delighted that he went out of his way to make extra money, and I’m glad it’s 5 percent rather than the 10 percent. It indicates he puts a priority on education.”

Arceneaux said a 5 percent cut means colleges must trim about $25 million from their budgets.

The fact Edwards singled out education for a lesser cut is “an indication that education is playing a different role” in the state, he said.

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“I don’t want to eliminate any more programs — in fact, I wouldn’t do any good to eliminate programs in midyear,” Wharton said.

“I don’t want to cut anything that goes on in the classroom or in the laboratory. We’ll look at the total operation of the university.”

Wharton said he is grateful the cuts are only 5 percent and that the state has not imposed any “external constraints” on the university’s flexibility in meeting the cut.

“It really could have been worse,” said Joffre T. Whisenton, president of the Southern University System. “We appreciate the governor’s stance in order to account for the fact such a cut would have on the institutions.”

Whisenton said he does not anticipate any layoffs as a result of the cut, but he said administrators will be looking at every aspect of Southern’s budgets for possible cuts, including salaries of top executives.

He said the 5 percent cut will mean about a $2,275,000 reduction for the Southern system.

Even if the cut comes from part of the budget cut “took a lot of courage on the governor’s part,” said Nichols State University President Donald Ayo, chairman of the President’s Council of the Board of Trustees for State Colleges and Universities.

University of Southwestern Louisiana President Ray Authement said the plan is better than previous proposals in two ways. It does not mandate reducing employee work loads and it gives universities heads the flexibility to decide how best to cut their budgets.

The university anticipated about a 5 percent budget cut, which amounts to about $1.73 million, and already set aside money to cover it. Authement said.

However, Authement said the cut will soak up those contingency funds.

In large part the same way as USL, the LSU Agricultural Center anticipated a midyear cut, but the ag center set aside only 2.9 percent for that purpose, Ag Center Chancellor Rouse Caffey said.

“Of course, we still need 2.1 percent,” Caffey said. “That’s $1 million roughly. It will be very hard to get that, but I hope not to affect people. Obviously, all new programs will be put on hold.”

LSU Medical Center Chancellor Perry Rigby said the 5 percent cut totals about $6 million for the center, which will be split between the Shreveport and New Orleans campuses.

Legal history center of Southeastern Louisiana University, said giving administrators the authority to make cuts where they see fit is the best part about the governor’s latest plan.

Our view has been to cut salaries last of all,” Crain said.

He said a midyear budget cut was anticipated and he expects to take the money out of maintenance and equipment.

“If we don’t mow the grass or let the buildings get cold, that will be difficult, but it’s better than having to cut salaries,” Crain said.

Louisiana Tech President Jay Taylor agreed that the budget cuts can probably come out of budgets other than personnel.

“Don’t buy library materials,” Taylor said. “We increased our library budget, doubled it, last year because we had fallen behind in that area. Now we’ll have to get that money back.”

Taylor said he had budgeted some money for a midyear budget cut, but was hoping it would be in the 1 percent range.

“We do not anticipate any immediate layoffs. We don’t anticipate cutting pay either,” Taylor said, adding that he will continue his freeze on travel and any purchases except those of an emergency nature.