La. school dollars not working

By GUY COATES
Associated Press writer

Louisiana spends enough money on public education to pay tuition at highly selective private schools for all of its 300,000-plus students, but the dollars aren't working, legislators are complaining.

"Many states spend enough money to do the same thing, but their systems are in better shape and the reason is that more of their dollars are finding their way into the classroom," said one lawmaker. "But a number of legislators have been saying."

The hue and cry has been greater because lawmakers and parents alike are concerned that reality is that the dollar has to go further now. Elementary and secondary education, always too sacred a cow to be chopped by the cutting ax, is on the block.

Forty-five percent of the state's education budget is spent on education — 32 percent of the total on elementary and secondary education. That 32 percent amounts to about $1 billion.

But, the Legislature is faced in the new fiscal year with a general fund that might total anywhere from $600 million to $1 billion less than what is being spent now.

More and more lawmakers are saying that not enough of the dollars is spent on elementary and secondary education is finding its way into the classroom.

Teachers have been telling them that for years. "We spend $2,000 per student in this state while Alabama spends $2,000 but we can't pay our teachers as much as they do," said Kevin Brilli, his Baton Rouge. "Something's wrong here."

State government provides 53.4 percent of all elementary and secondary funding while the 66 local school systems spend 36.9 percent and federal funds make up the remainder.

The average pay for a beginning teacher in Louisiana is just over $12,000 and that's just over the federal poverty line.

The wealthier parishes can supplement the teacher's pay with local funds but several parishes can't spend a dime.

Reilly and others have said the so-called Minimum Foundation Formula must be changed. That's the formula that decides how the $1 billion will be spread.

The money is handed out to the school systems based mainly on student population.

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