Leader says bus drivers might accept Roemer plan

By JOHN LaPLANTE
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Gov. Buddy Roemer's latest compromise on school funding might be winning over one of his most vocal and powerful opponents — the bus driver lobby — to his scaled-down campaign to shift more state aid into academics.

Despite a big rally held Thursday to show solidarity against unfair treatment for bus drivers, they might support Roemer's latest budget for public schools, said Harold Broussard, president of the School Bus Operators Association.

He said Louisiana's 7,000 bus drivers don't mind, for instance, taking a small pay cut during the state's current hard times as long as they know cuts are spread fairly.

"They may lose a little, but we've got to give somewhere," Broussard said.

An average bus driver is paid about $9,600 a year, which comes out to $12 to $21 an hour, depending on how long it takes them to drive routes that typically range from seven to 30 miles, Broussard said.

He stressed that he has not endorsed any funding changes and can't do so until he sees a final plan.

Next week, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education will debate Roemer's latest compromise school budget, which, for the coming school year, would raise teacher salaries but give school boards $27 million less to pay non-teaching costs such as transportation.

Broussard said it's only the first-year plan that might be acceptable.

The bus driver leader said he's still worried by Roemer's insistence on eliminating all $348 million worth of state aid for non-teaching costs next year, after he convinces the Legislature and the voters to give school boards more locally raised revenues to pay those costs.

Roemer repeated that goal Thursday, but acknowledged he might not be able

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to achieve it.

"I've tried to design a program that will give us enough time — one year — to see how tax reform does," Roemer told news reporters when asked about the bus drivers' rally.

"If we can do tax reform right, giving local government some strengthening, some authority, then it ought to be their job to pay for utilities, bus drivers, cooks and other non-academic costs, the governor said.

Roemer wants to phase out state aid in only two steps because "I'm afraid if we don't move quickly, we might not move at all."

However, he said, "I'm practical. If it can't be done, it can't be done."

Hundreds of bus drivers — most wearing gold-colored T-shirts identifying them as "Movers of Education" — marched from Memorial Stadium to the State Capitol for two hours of speeches from 47 legislators, several fellow bus drivers and others.

Despite Broussard's somewhat conciliatory tone toward the administration, many demonstrators carried signs criticizing the governor.

"Join the revolution, then join us in the soup kitchen," read one sign. "Say no to Roemer revolution," read another.

Some of the drivers booed when Broussard announced that Roemer was not expected to address them on the Capitol steps. Roemer said later in the day that he asked the leaders of the bus drivers' association to relay his sentiments to their members.

"I met with the executive committee yesterday ... we had a good meeting," Roemer said. "They gave me all kinds of examples of how we could save money."

Roemer's school funding plan relies on higher state sales taxes and, as a further compromise he announced Wednesday, higher local property taxes.

Charles Taylor, president of the East Baton Rouge Parish School Bus Operators Association, said he's skeptical about the latest compromise, which would allow school boards to raise property taxes by 4.5 mills without a vote of the people.

If their property taxes are raised without their permission, "People will tend to not vote for other, existing millage" when it comes up for renewal, and school boards would lose money anyway, Taylor said.

Rep. Donald Ray Kennard, D-Baton Rouge, said the East Baton Rouge Parish School Board might not be able to raise its property taxes.

Other lawmakers simply expressed support for the bus drivers.

"I'm with them. My mother was a bus driver," said Rep. Mike McClary, D-Baker.