More cuts may hurt schools, officials say

By JOHN LaPLANTE
Capitol news bureau

State education officials said Wednesday that Louisiana's public school students shouldn't be affected by Gov. Treen's order to trim most state spending by 4.4 percent.

But further budget cuts being pondered for this year and next year could seriously impair educational programs, Deputy Superintendent of Education Robert Gaston said.

"That will hurt," Gaston said, pointing to a chart that showed the education budget would lose $28 million — including nearly $17 million for academic programs — under a 15 percent budget cut being considered for next year by Treen.

Last month, the governor, faced with sagging tax revenues for the first quarter of the state's fiscal year, ordered most state agencies to cut their budgets by 4.4 percent to avoid deficit spending.

The bulk of the education budget — $1 billion in basic aid to local school systems — was exempted from the order.

But more than $100 million in education funds is covered by the order. Much of that amount is for administrative expenses, but some affects direct services to students.

The Department of Education released a preliminary list showing $4.5 million that could be saved, probably without affecting instruction.

"We have attempted to cut programs that will least affect the children," said the department's finance chief, G. Byron Benton.

For instance, a special reading program will be trimmed by the cuts — but probably only its administrative expenses, not any classes.

More than 40 vacant positions in the department will have to remain unfilled for the rest of the budget year in order to meet the cuts, Benton said.

He warned there is little fat left in the education budget and any further cuts — Treen has hinted that continued low tax income could invite more austerity — could begin to affect instruction in the classroom.

And for next year Treen has ordered agencies to prepare budgets totaling 15 percent less than this year's. Any expenses above that amount must be justified and are considered candidates for elimination if there isn't enough money to continue state services at current levels.

If Treen and the Legislature decide the 15 percent cuts are necessary, "We're going to have to cut some programs," Benton said.

The education committee of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education received the department's list of proposed cuts Wednesday.

The committee also considered two key programs being developed by the department — a long-range testing program designed to eventually eliminate social promotions in Louisiana schools and a system for inspecting schools to ensure they meet state standards.

Both issues will be discussed during the board's regular monthly meeting Thursday at 10 a.m. in the Department of Education building.

Morning Advocate
Baton Rouge, La.
Thursday, Nov. 18, 1982
P. 16-13 COL. 4-6