NAACP officials to evaluate school cuts

By JOHN SEIDEN
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An alliance between the NAACP and public school officials may be necessary to save financially strapped schools from looming state budget cuts now under consideration by Gov. Edwin Edwards, local NAACP spokesmen said Friday.

Edwards ordered a 5 percent cut in the state's Minimum Foundation Program earlier this year, which prompted the School Board to order schools closed Jan. 14 to save money.

The Louisiana Legislature ended its special session last week by giving Edwards authority to make additional cuts in spending to offset an expected $188 million deficit facing the state this fiscal year.

Local NAACP President George Eames on Friday said he is concerned about how other possible cuts by Edwards will affect the ability of local school systems to comply with federal court orders on desegregation.

Eames said he will direct NAACP attorney Robert Williams to review the state's federal desegregation cases, that he said now include public school systems in all 64 parishes of Louisiana.

The purpose will be to evaluate the impact of any cuts by Edwards on the schools, he said.

"We don't like it. We're on the fringe of violating these court orders," Eames said about state officials. "They're saying we don't have money for education but we have money to build prisons.

"Do we direct to private schools?" Eames asked.

"We don't see them cutting off funds for the gifted and talented programs or the money being appropriated to the private and parochial schools," he said. "When a system is under a desegregation court order, the federal government supersedes the state."

Williams on Friday said no plans can be made until Edwards announces his plan to balance the state's budget.

If Edwards announces further cuts in education, Williams said he will review them to determine their impact on court-ordered desegregation efforts in local schools.

Williams, who is active in a majority of the desegregation cases in Louisiana public schools, said he will have to take a closer look at the state's financial condition before determining what action the NAACP should take.

"What you have to do is second-guess a governor who says the state is in bad shape," Williams said. "The problem is, how do we address it? What's the best forum? I don't know."

The NAACP would need cooperation from local school officials, who have sometimes been adversaries in the fight for desegregation, in providing details on how the budget cuts are affecting desegregation efforts, he said.

This will include information on the possible effects of cuts in specific areas of education such as pupil-teacher ratios and transportation, he said.

School officials would become "our most important witnesses" should any efforts be made to fight the cuts, he said.

"They will have to generate the information and provide the information on how it would adversely affect them," Williams said. "If they can't do it, they need to say so now."

In the last hours of the special session, the Legislature directed Edwards to restore $114 million in funding to education, health and welfare and prison programs. There also gave him the authority to cut $275 million from anywhere in the budget and add another $75 million.

Legislators were not able to balance the budget during the 16-day money-raising special session that ended last week.

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