Panel bows to foes of school plan

Roemer raps opposition, maps floor fight strategy

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A House panel yanked the foundation from Gov. Buddy Roemer's education program Thursday, but he lashed back with a scathing attack on a school establishment that he said is blocking "the only way to pull Louisiana forward."

Roemer's whole recovery plan hinges on Friday's full House vote to resurrect the funding formula by overturning an 11-7 negative report by the House Education Committee.

The bill promotes teachers a modest pay raise and somewhat reduces state aid for non-classroom expenses — a limited but crucial first step in Roemer's education package.

Besides better schools, "It means more jobs, better government and more citizen involvement. It's our future," Roemer said in the second radio speech.

But the panel bowed to unanimous opposition from school interests who said the 1 percent adjustment in their total budget would cause upheaval in public schools that would reduce student's chances of learning.

In the House remarks, yet delivered during his three months in office, Roemer blamed the committee vote on teacher unions, bus drivers and local

\[\text{legislative news, 12A, 13A}\]

School lunchroom workers from across the state converge on the Capitol steps to protest cuts in funding for their salaries. See story on 12A.

School officials who oppose a plan he said would make teachers and school districts more accountable.

"The teacher unions opposed us because we require the teachers to be evaluated," he said in the second address, broadcast to a 40-station network.

"The bus drivers oppose us because they want the same tenure and pay," he said.

"The school boards oppose us because they have to manage their own system and be accountable to the people."

"Some superintendents oppose us because they have to cut 1 percent out of their budgets — and we add a lot more than that back to the classroom," Roemer said.

"We've heard from the special-interests groups," he said. "I need to hear from the parents and the teachers."

Roemer asked voters to call their representatives through the House switchboard — 542-0945 — and tell them to "put the children first."

One of the two House operators said a few hundred calls — far more than their usual workload — were made during the hour or so after Roemer's second address.

Roemer refused requests for press interviews or a news conference to answer questions about the most embarrassing defeat of his three-month-old administration.

Staffers said the governor was angered by the vote, which was held while he addressed a diabetes convention in New Orleans. He spent the afternoon huddled with supporters, planning strategy for Friday's vote.

If he wins a majority vote Friday, Roemer still must show the school budget through three more legislative committees and the full Senate. His delicately balanced plan, previously threatened twice by a state education board, also requires lawmakers to raise sales taxes by $320 million and give school boards the power to levy a 4.5-mill property tax without voter approval.

The key components of the package must pass 12 more crucial votes to succeed.

Roemer addressed the Education Committee, which was appointed by his hand-picked House speaker and is headed by his education floor leader, Rep. Jimmy Long, D-Natchitoches.

He then left the committee to a large lobbying force — about a dozen of his attorneys, personal aides and House leaders — who whispered with lawmakers throughout the hearing.

Long said the much-compromised bill raises all the objections previously raised by school employee groups and school officials, and leaves them with only $32 million less non-classroom aid for the coming school year.

"It is not an unbearable burden," he said, in return for higher teacher pay, smaller classes and security for all school employees from severe budget cuts.

But opponents were steadfast, arguing that less money for non-teaching expenses will cause problems that spill over into the classroom.

"When you take from one group of employees to give to another group, you are taking away from the healthy human relations necessary to provide quality education to children," said Virginia Budd, president of the Louisiana Association of Educators.

"Our working conditions are a child's learning conditions," she said.

Ponder Jones, financial expert for the Louisiana School Boards Association, said Roemer's plan would require local school boards to make up, with local funds, the amount of money he is shifting from non-classroom aid to the teacher pay raises.

In effect, he said, "The (teacher) salary increases are really going to be provided by the local school systems."

Several local school officials said they won't ask their school boards to raise the 4.5-mill no-vote property tax because voters would just punish them by turning down current taxes when they come up for re-election.

Rep. Joe Delpt, D-Baton Rouge, suggested it would be unfair to pass a new school budget before approving the tax bills necessary to finance it.

"This won't be nothing but a piece of paper, a cruel hoax on the bus drivers and teachers — if we're not willing to vote to fund it," Delpt said.

Rep. Sean Reilly, D-Baton Rouge, said he would vote for the one-year, $320 million increase in sales taxes proposed by Roemer to temporarily retain most state aid for non-instructional expenses.

Reilly said school boards should at least be willing to vote for the smaller property tax.

"The 4.5 mills, in the big picture, is very little to ask from those people," Reilly said.