Panel rejects BESE plan for vo-tech spending cuts

By JOHN LEPLANTE
Capital News Bureau

Lawmakers who recently ordered a 25 percent cut in state vocational-technical school funding plan to put that cut into effect Thursday.

Budget experts warned that postponing the spending reductions could force the state vocational-technical schools to shut down completely as soon as January.

Appealed by students who packed a Capitol hearing room, the Joint Legislative Committee on the Budget told the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education to come up with different ways to reduce expenses.

The committee voted 14-4 to reject the revised budgets, drafted by BESE, that cut $15 million lawmaking away from the vocational-technical schools. Most of the money would be saved by laying off instructors and other employees.

Three senators who had authored the vo-tech budget cuts — committee chairman B.B. "Sixty" Rayburn of Bogalusa, Don Kelly of Natchitoches and Foster Campbell of Elm Grove — suggested waiting a few months before taking any steps to shut down the vo-tech program.

Campbell suggested that BESE instead require vo-tech instructors to "nip out the classroom" and "sweep the floor" to reduce expenses.

State Budget Director Ralph Pertman warned the committee that postponing the cuts would deplete the reduced money available for vo-tech schools and force even bigger cuts later in the fiscal year.

Already, 361 employees have been marked for layoffs.

"The longer you wait, the bigger that number will be," Pertman said.

If vo-tech spending continues unchecked, the schools will run out of money by March — even if state and local revenues increase as lawmakers hoped earlier this year, said Richard England of the Legislative Fiscal Office.

If mineral revenues remain low, as suggested by the stagnant world oil market, then further budget cuts could force the schools to close by the end of January, England said.

BESE President Claire Landry of Arabi said she's not sure whether the board has the legal right to put the cuts into effect without the budget committee's approval.

She said the board probably will hold a special meeting to discuss the issue.

"We have to decide — Do we go ahead with what we want to do? Do we come up with another plan?" she said.

Board officials, ordered by the Legislature to cut the $66 million vo-tech budget by 25 percent, found themselves in the unusual position of defending budget cuts for their own agency.

Typically, it's the lawmakers who propose budget cuts while bureaucrats try to justify spending as much as they can.

Board director Jim Meza said the 92 vo-tech schools have become understaffed over the years, and some of the proposed cuts are only curing "the sins of the past."

"We did have a surplus of assistant directors and we did have a surplus of instructors," Meza said.

For instance, he said, the board traditionally has allowed as few as seven students in a class, which is "an unrealistic pupil-teacher ratio," Meza said.

The board proposes saving $4 million by merging multiple classes for instance, by combining seven nursing classes into five classes at Baton Rouge Vocational-Technical Institute.

More than half of the assistant school director jobs also would be abolished, plus five director jobs.

The plan also abolished some less popular or less successful single-course offerings, forcing students to go to another school to learn that trade.

Various lawmakers complained that the plan does not close enough small schools, does not reduce enough administrative expenses and does not determine exactly how many students will be left without a class to attend.

Sen. Kelly said there's no point in starting any budget cuts until state officials know whether continued low oil prices will force even bigger budget cuts.

"This plan is not really going to solve the problem," Kelly said.

Sen. Rayburn agreed, and suggested the board meet again and "come back with some other alternatives."

Campbell, Kelly and Rayburn were among five senators who drafted a list of $450 million worth of budget cuts — including the 25 percent cut for vo-tech — that was eventually adopted by the House and Senate in June and allowed to go into law by Gov. Edwin Edwards in July.

In all, 12 Budget Committee members who had voted in favor of the state budget bill — which included the overall cut in vo-tech funds — voted against the specific reductions proposed by BESE Thursday.

Budget cuts to some other state agencies were restored by increased revenues, but the vo-tech schools are still on the list of spending reductions.

More than 100 vo-tech students crowded the hearing room, but none were allowed to speak before the committee made its decision after about four hours of deliberations.

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