Panels OK $15 million in vo-tech school cuts

By JOHN LaPLANTE
Capitol news bureau

State trade schools will offer fewer courses, larger classes and longer waiting lists if the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education adopts $15 million in spending cuts that board members accepted with few objections Wednesday.

Some schools also would end remedial classes needed by many students who didn’t learn enough in high school to handle the reading and math skills required by their vocational course.

The budget cuts approved by the board’s vo-tech and finance committees Wednesday would eliminate 400 positions and close one of the 52 state schools that teach welding, nursing, office skills and dozens of other occupations.

The plan is practically assured of passage because all 11 board members attended the committee hearing. The full board meets Thursday. Its plan must then be reviewed by the Joint Legislative Committee on the Budget.

The reductions are required to cope with a 25-percent budget cut stripped from vo-tech operations by the legislature as part of its overall plan to balance the state budget.

Board member Keith Johnson of New Orleans said the cuts are continuing “a slow, destructive process” that will “dismantle the vo-tech system” in Louisiana.

Board members also heard from students fearing they won’t be able to complete their training and an employee angry at losing his job after 11 years with the vo-tech system.

“You just took 11 years out of my life,” said Kenneth W. Powers, a vo-tech curriculum specialist at the curriculum center in Naillacoches.

Powers said he expected to be laid off Sept. 5, the date the budget-cutting package takes effect, and “I have no idea what I’m going to do.”

Powers said he was angered by the almost jovial mood in which the board members went through the cuts, which are the result of three weeks of intensive work by the board’s staff.

“The cuts are brutal. In many cases, they are actually ruining people’s lives,” said board member Milton Hamel of Shreveport.

“I assure you that members of the board are not taking it lightly,” he told Powers.

However, Hamel said, “The cuts were based on trying to serve the greatest number of students, and not on trying to provide the greatest number of jobs.”

Board director Jim Meza said he was able to save large sums by reducing administrative expenses. Clerical, custodial and other types of employees were deleted from many schools.

Six smaller schools even lost their directors, who will be transferred to regional schools that will absorb the small school’s administrative costs, saving close to $1 million.

In addition, the school in Springhill, in Webster Parish, is being closed.

Meza said he also concentrated on merging multiple classes and eliminating courses that teach skills not in demand in the job market.

For instance, at Baton Rouge Vocational-Technical Institute, the largest trade school in the area, students from seven nursing classes will be crowded into five classes, and two electronics classes will be merged into one.

At smaller Portside Vocational-Technical School, a welding class is being eliminated as well as the director’s job.

Meza said the cuts mean that some students will have to learn in larger classes, some will wait longer to get into the smaller number of classes offered, and some may have to attend another school to attend a course that is eliminated at their local school.

Many schools also cut out remedial classes. At Baton Rouge Vo-Tech, only one of six remedial classes will continue.

Meza said the so-called special needs courses allow students who are “basically illiterate” to bone up on basic reading and math skills while they undergo specific job training.

He said the classes, considered crucial for many students, were balanced against trade classes — the major purpose of the trade schools, Meza said — in deciding what to cut to comply with the 25-percent budget reductions.