Parochial schools may lose buses

Budget reduction could affect transportation provided non-public students

Parochial school students could be left standing at the curb if the public school system shuts down for several days and keeps its buses parked to save money.

Shortening the school year and reducing salaries are just two of the options being discussed by School Board members and staff officials as a means of head off a deficit of several million dollars.

Two groups have called meetings for next week to discuss ways of combating the expected budget shortfall.

The staff and board are considering a number of measures to combat a $5.5 million or 5 percent cut in state funding to local education and a predicted loss of at least $2 million in sales tax revenues already included in the 1986-87 fiscal year budget.

The school system also is faced with unexpected hikes of nearly $3 million in liability insurance for its vehicle fleet and employee insurance.

One of the proposals generating the most interest is closing schools for several days. Such a move could save $500,000 to $600,000 per day, finance department officials have said.

But closing schools will bring transportation problems for the parochial school system.

Under the system's present arrangement, it provides 106 buses to transport 5,995 students to parochial schools.

"It is my understanding that if all employees have to be furloughed when the schools are closed, it will include bus drivers," said Pat Cosper, director of transportation for the public school system.

Sister Mary Michaeilne, head of the Catholic diocese schools here, said she has been monitoring the situation.

"There has been no official word that they will do that but we are looking at the situation," Sister Michaeilne said.

"We are going to keep our schools open 180 days and provide the children the education that we promised them."

To close the parochial schools "would place an added burden on the parents who would have to take steps to keep their children at home" on the days the public schools are closed, Sister Michaeilne said.

If the public schools have to close, the parochial school system will have a plan developed, she said.

School system Finance Director Grady Hazel said his "initial reaction" to the question is that "buses would not be provided" to the parochial schools.

"Providing the buses would be counterproductive to the school system's goal of saving enough money to meet state budget cuts," he said.

At least two board members believe the buses should be provided.

"If we have told them that we would provide bus service, I would be hard pressed not to do it," board member Sue Fowler said.

Board Vice President Robert Crawford said he opposes action that would eliminate bus service to the parochial schools.

"It wouldn't be fair to take the buses away," Crawford said. "We may need to look at the cost figures. I don't think it would cost us a lot to run those buses."

Two groups have scheduled meetings for next week to discuss the budget problems facing the East Baton Rouge Parish school system.

The East Baton Rouge Parish Association of Educators and the Baton Rouge District Parent-Teacher Association have set meetings for the Instructional Resource Center at 1022 S. Foster Drive.

The District PTA meeting is scheduled for 7:30 p.m. Monday, according to spokeswoman Pat Vallee.

Superintendent of Schools Raymond Arveson and School Board members have been asked to attend, Vallee said.

"We want to inform people on how they can effectively voice their concerns," Vallee said.

The EBRPAE, the largest teacher group in the school system, has scheduled a meeting at 7 p.m. next Thursday. All school employees are invited to the meeting, EBRPAE spokesman Dick Eiche said.

Arveson and members of the district PTA, Friends of Public Education, the Greater Baton Rouge Chamber of Commerce and the School Board members have been asked to attend the meeting, Eiche said.

"This is everybody's problem," he said.