School boards work to survive cuts

By The Associated Press

The Caddo Parish School Board cut funding for special programs for disadvantaged children and superior students in efforts to survive cuts in state funding, and the Lafourche Parish School Board discussed going to court to keep the state from making those cuts.

In Catahoula Parish, teacher organizations talked about a strike, if the cuts go through.

Last summer, the Legislature ordered a 4.5 percent cut in the Minimum Foundation Program, the vehicle for state funding of local school systems. In October, Gov. Edwin Edwards ordered a 5 percent reduction, postponed until after last month's special legislative session. The MFP cuts total about $90 million.

Caddo slashed $1.6 million from its budget Wednesday in trying to meet a predicted $4.5 million shortfall. The bulk of Wednesday's cuts rely on four specific programs as the board voted to:

- Discontinue the Extended Day Program, a remedial program aimed at helping disadvantaged students by providing after-hours instruction.
- Eliminate the Discoveries Program for gifted students.
- Quit funding academic field trips, although the school system will provide buses for groups willing to pay a driver and the price of gas for a trip.
- Suspend administrative internships for the remainder of this year.

President Leo Turner of the Catahoula Association of Educators said Wednesday that Louisiana appears headed on the road to a statewide teachers strike, possibly as early as next month.

Unless state officials move to restore some of the funds cut from the Minimum Foundation Program within the next few weeks, teachers may go out in February, Turner said.

He said a majority of Catahoula Parish educators support a work stoppage. More than 200 turned out for a teachers meeting Wednesday to discuss a survey by the Louisiana Association of Educators.

The LAE filed a suit opposing the cuts in part because the state Constitution says the MFP shall be funded. The LAE is demanding a special session to restore MFP money.

Turner said some teachers feel that a strike in the middle of the school year would have the biggest impact on the public and would draw attention to the plight of public schools.

But educators thus far have not called a strike, in part because of the impact it would have on students, including graduating seniors and students seeking scholarships, he said.

There's still a question of whether Caddo school employees will have their pay trimmed.

Superintendent Walter Lee said again Wednesday that across-the-board pay cuts are possible, though a last option.

In Lafourche Parish, School Board members asked the Louisiana School Boards Association to look into the legality of cutting funds allocated through the state's Minimum Foundation Program. If the LSBA finds grounds, the Lafourche Parish board may sue, the board members agreed.