School funds issue back to BESE

By JOHN LaPLANTE
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The Legislature on Monday tossed the hot potato of school funding back to the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, which meets Wednesday to consider Gov. Buddy Roemer's latest plan to shift more state aid to the classroom.

Board president Keith Johnson of New Orleans predicted the board will endorse a compromise, drafted by Johnson and embraced by Roemer, that reduces aid for non-teaching costs but at least guarantees the lower funding. The battle is far from over, however. School interests, which convinced the board to ignore the same plan last week, still are fighting changes in the $1 billion-plus fund, which hands out state money to 1,500 public schools.

On Monday, the House Education Committee bucked those interests by voting 16-1 to reject the traditional school budget, drafted by the board in January before Roemer announced his plans to overhaul state school aid.

The panel's vote puts pressure on the board to reconsider the compromise, which, in effect, would finance a teacher pay raise by giving school districts about $70 million less for non-instructional expenses such as transportation and food service.

The committee obviously was well-lobbied by Roemer, who says he needs the old school budget out of the way -- and a new one installed -- for his overall school improvement program to succeed.

Committee chairman Jimmy Long, Roemer's education floor leader, told members that rejecting the old school budget just gives the board a chance to consider a new one.

Long acknowledged that poor communications by the Roemer administration have aggravated skepticism about his plans to overhaul school funding.

But, Long said school employees probably just don't understand the compromise if they think it will wreak havoc on their districts.

"The biggest problems that I see out there are lack of communication ... and fear of the unknown," Long told a

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Rep. Dale Smith, D-Po1lock, the only lawmaker to vote against the administration, also assured school workers their legislators won't desert them.

"We're not going to throw you to the wolves," Smith said. "There's going to be a safety net. The children of this state are going to be provided for."

But school officials said they can't cope with the $70 million cut, which amounts to about 4 percent of their total operating budgets for the coming school year. East Baton Rouge Parish school would lose about $7 million.

Bus drivers, cooks and other school employees will be laid off to cope with the budget cuts because school boards can't increase revenues, said Fred Skelton, president of the Louisiana Federation of Teachers.

"People are not tax-minded right now. They're anti-tax right now," agreed Harold Broussard, speaking for bus drivers.

Two unions oppose the Roemer plan even though the bulk of their members are teachers, who would need the budget changes to get a 5 percent-plus pay raise.

"You are dividing people in this state" by placing teachers in a category different from cooks, janitors and other non-teaching employees, said Virginia Budd, president of the Louisiana Association of Educators.

After the committee vote to reject the traditional budget, Johnson confirmed that he will call a special board meeting for Wednesday to consider the compromise.

He proposed it last week, suggesting it as an alternative to Roemer's original plan, which frightened school officials, in part, because it would have removed non-instructional expenses from the constitutionally protected formula.

The compromise cuts just as much state aid but, if approved by the board and the Legislature, would ensure the state pays the reduced funds for non-instructional costs.

A Roemer aide told the panel that the governor accepted the compromise, but the board, faced with two plans -- including one they hadn't seen until just before the meeting -- decided to just stick with the old formula approved in January.

Now that the Legislature has thrown the issue back to the board, "I think we will wind up getting my plan passed," Johnson said in a telephone interview.

"I was one of the holdouts on the other plan. So probably there's the votes to get this plan passed," he said.