Schools could lose more funds next year

By JOHN LaPLANTE
Capitol news bureau

Louisiana's public schools, already about $106 million short of the state aid due them this year, could lose another $140 million next year if lawmakers don't raise money for schools in next month's special session.

The Department of Education's budget request for the 1987-88 fiscal year will propose $140 million less for the Minimum Foundation Program, which finances about half the operations of the state's 66 school districts.

Budget officials say that number could change after the Legislature meets next month to tackle a growing budget shortfall.

But Deputy Education Superintendent Joe Kyle, who is drafting the department's proposed budget, said Thursday he is not optimistic.

"I don't see any light at the end of this tunnel," Kyle told the finance committee of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.

The Minimum Foundation Program, previously exempt from state budget cuts, has been trimmed about $106 million this year, prompting a storm of protest from teacher groups and school officials who predict less state aid will lower the quality of instruction in Louisiana schools.

Restoring some of the education budget cuts ranks high on the agenda for the special legislative session scheduled to begin Dec. 4, Gov. Edwin Edwards says.

SEE SCHOOLS, 4A

SCHOOLS

CONTINUED FROM 1A

said last week.

If the Legislature raises money for schools this year, that money probably would be continued into the next school year, thus reducing further budget cuts for next year, the governor's budget officer, Ralph Perlman, said Wednesday.

So next year's budget proposals, although due from state agencies Dec. 15, are "up in the air," Perlman said.

"We're not locked in concrete," he said.

Meanwhile, the Department of Education must follow orders from Perlman to draft proposed spending plans that assume a 20 percent loss of state funds next year, after increases for inflation.

Perlman said the budget directives for next fiscal year were drawn before the governor announced the special session.

Perlman said action in the session "might fly in the face of our earlier instructions" to budget writers in state agencies.

The Department of Education has been ordered to draft a budget totaling $1.03 billion for the next fiscal year, compared to $1.17 billion the department still has to spend this year, after budget cuts imposed by the Legislature and the governor during the past five months.

The Minimum Foundation Program is by far the largest chunk of the department's spending.

The program is based on a formula that, in theory, sets the amount of state aid necessary to maintain a minimally acceptable educational program in each of the state's public school districts.

This year the formula would generate about $991 million for local schools, but budget cuts have left the fund with $885 million to spend, according to Jennings Cleveland, head of the Education Department's bureau of school finance.

Following the governor's budget writing orders, the department will propose about $735 million in school aid for the next fiscal year, Cleveland said.

The proposed budget will include a "decision package" — an alternative spending plan — that would restore $240 million to the program, he said.

Funding that package will hinge on whether state revenues increase significantly next year.