Teacher suit claims cuts in MFP illegal

By JOHN LaPLANTE
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Gov. Edwin Edwards and the Legislature violated the state constitution when they reduced school aid by $90 million, the state's largest teacher group said in a lawsuit filed Thursday.

The Louisiana Association of Educators is challenging the budget cuts on grounds the constitution requires full funding of the Minimum Foundation Program — the largest source of revenue for local school districts.

Budget cuts ordered by Edwards and the Legislature would slice about $90 million from that formula.

If allowed to stand, the cuts "would make it almost impossible for school systems to adequately function," said LAE president Shirley Williams.

Earlier this week a Baton Rouge judge threw out a similar lawsuit filed by Education Superintendent Tom Clausen.

Charles McCowan, attorney for LAE, said his challenge of the budget cuts is "more artfully drawn" and addresses issues not directly challenged by Clausen.

"We hope the court will put to rest once and for all whether or not the Minimum Foundation funding formula can be cut," McCowan said.

The MFP, as it is called by educators, provides about half the money used to operate public schools.

Most school districts in Louisiana will cancel some school days unless the Legislature restores the budget cuts, James Prescott, director of the Louisiana School Boards Association, said Wednesday.

The Legislature trimmed the MFP by 4.5 percent last summer and Edwards recently ordered another 5 percent cut as part of a continuing effort to balance state expenses with declining revenues.

Edwards has announced plans to call a special session of the Legislature in early December to attack the state's fiscal crisis.

He said restoring school budget cuts will be a high priority during the session.

Williams said LAE didn't file a lawsuit after the original budget cuts last summer because "we were hoping our continued efforts in lobbying would get these cuts restored."

However, when the governor ordered a second bite out of the MFP last month, it became unlikely the original cuts would be funded anytime soon, she said.