Treen says education cuts to be last

MONROE (UPI) — Education remains a top priority of state government, and funds for elementary and secondary schools would be the last to be cut if further budget slashing became necessary, Gov. Treen said Thursday.

But a growing state deficit will make it virtually impossible to cover a $7.2 million spending gap already built into the education budget, Treen said.

"I do not believe that by special appropriation in the coming legislative session we will be able to put that $7.2 million back in the budget," Treen said. "I realize that presents a hardship for you on the local level, but I cannot hold out hope for you on that."

Funds for elementary and secondary education were exempted from an earlier 4.4 percent reduction Treen ordered in all state spending, and the governor promised to do "everything in (his) power" to avoid cuts in that domain of the budget.

Treen told delegates to the Louisiana School Boards Association convention, "That will be the last item that I will touch if I have to make additional cuts."

In an effort to decrease the education deficit, Treen said he would seek a change in criteria for placing students in special education classes. Nearly one in 10 Louisiana students is enrolled in the costly courses, Treen said.

"We must change the criteria by which we move people into special education," he said. "I think what we’ve done is apply the criteria in such a way that slow learners are going into special education."

Treen also defended his decision to sign a controversial measure exempting school boards from a section of the state ethics code, and he defended his continued support of the Professional Improvement Program.

The ethics code exemption allows relatives of school board members to be hired by their school district, a policy Treen said kept some teachers out of work unfairly.

"I think it’s important we demonstrate that that will not be abused, and I have every confidence it will not be," the governor said.

The state education department is working to assess the problems and effectiveness of PIP, which awards teachers pay hikes if they take classes or attend seminars.

The governor said any problems in the program should be ironed out and the plan given a chance to work.

"I believe it is sound fundamentally," Treen said.

"Anybody who suggests to you that we do away with this needs to face the fact this program provided substantial pay increases for teachers in the state of Louisiana. I think they needed those increases," Treen said.

Louisiana’s education system has improved overall, Treen said, noting as examples PIP, remedial education improvements and a school that will open in Natchitoches in September for gifted and talented students.