USL, local schools affected

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Devastating. 9/24/1980
That's how local education officials view proposed budget cuts totaling more than $97 million unveiled by Gov. Edwin Edwards Tuesday.

"We are not posturing politically," said USL president Ray Authement. "We are saying this is absolutely devastating financially."

Superintendent Dr. Wayne Vasher agreed.

"It is devastating on top of all the money we have lost from the Minimum Foundation, on top of sales taxes declines, and on top of the millage assessment changes," Vasher said.

Edwards has delayed implementation of the cuts until a meeting with leading legislators Oct. 2.

The cuts would chop at least $46.6 million from elementary and secondary education, $51 million from higher education, along with $237 million from other state departments. Edwards also proposes cutting an additional 3 percent across the board from all departments.

Dealing with those cuts has sent local officials scurrying back to their budgetary drawing boards.

"There is no way (we can do it without cuts)," Authement said, adding that USL stands to lose about $3.5 million, or 10 percent of its state funding.

University officials will closely examine all departments and programs before making any decision, Authement continued.

Raising fees, however, will be a last resort, he said. Hundreds of students were barely able to absorb the last tuition increase and would have to drop out if another was implemented, Authement explained.

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The local school system was in the process of reviewing its budget before Edwards announced his cuts, which could cost the local system about $1.5 million.

"We have to redo it again," said board president Danny Aucoin. The only way to absorb the cuts may be to cut salaries, which make up 90 percent of the budget, he added.

Earlier this year, the local system lost $1.4 million in a 4 1/2 percent cut in Minimum Foundation funding and sales tax revenues are about 10 percent below budget. Most recently, the system lost about $400,000 in millage assessment readjustments.

Vasher said he is not sure measures to deal with Edwards' most recent cuts can be prepared by the budget hearing scheduled for Oct. 1, a day before the cuts might go into effect.

Instead, they may keep their fingers crossed, hoping that Edwards changes his mind, Vasher said.

Both Vasher and Aucoin said they would support a proposal for a state lottery if the proceeds were dedicated to education.

"Otherwise, I don't support gambling in the state of Louisiana," Aucoin said.