Ascension Parish school raises on hold

By TIM TALLEY
River parishes bureau

DONALDSONVILLE — Public school employees in Ascension Parish won't be getting a raise this year thanks to uncertainty over declining state and local revenues.

Superintendent of Schools Ralph Ricardo recommended Tuesday night that the School Board hold off on issuing raises until administrators have a better idea of whether revenues for salary increases will be needed for operating expenses.

Ricardo told the board's finance committee that his staff will look at the school system's financial status again next spring and reconsider raises for teachers and other school personnel.

"I just don't think it would be prudent at this time to make that recommendation," Ricardo said.

The school system already is having to make up for the loss of $1.47 million due to state revenue cuts, Ricardo said. The Louisiana Legislature could replenish the money or order more cuts when it meets in special session next month, he said.

The school system also faces the possibility of falling sales and use tax revenues on the local level unless the economy improves. Cuts in school operating expenses will be made if revenues continue to fall, Ricardo said.

In past years, school employees have received raises from the board of more than 2 percent of their salaries.

School Board member Glynn Parent Sr. suggested that the board purchase hams or turkeys for school employees as a bonus in lieu of raises. However, Ricardo said auditors have ruled that tax dollars can't be spent in that way.

"Even if it were legal, it would be a problem for us," said School Board member Perry Sheets. He said the board's financial crunch will prohibit bonuses of any kind.

On another matter, School Board member Billy Arcement encouraged the board to endorse and participate in an anti-drug program planned in Lafayette in January 1987.

A convention dubbed "Louisiana Takes a Stand!" will be held Jan. 15 to focus attention on drug abuse and mount an offensive to eliminate drugs from schools, Arcement said.

He said the parish should establish a "zero goal" for removing drugs from Ascension's public schools.

"Anything less than that is certainly not what we should be looking at," he said.

He asked board members to contact citizens interested in participating in the convention and to endorse the program at the board's meeting next week.

"It's a serious attempt to combat a serious problem," Arcement said. First Lady Nancy Reagan is considering an invitation to be the convention's keynote speaker.

Arcement also urged board members to become involved in a statewide litter cleanup day tentatively planned in March 1987.

He said schools should be involved in the cleanup campaign, which is geared toward public and private property. Schools could sponsor a poster contest and litter education discussions.

"We're limitless to what we can do. We're not doing anything now," Arcement said.

A Keep America Beautiful campaign in Gonzales reduced litter in the city by 91 percent. A cleaner environment might help improve students' attitudes about themselves and their school work, he said.

"You can't live in a junky environment and expect to come to school and be a contributor," he said.

The committee made tentative plans to implement a voluntary blood testing and body chemistry program next year as part of a systemwide wellness program for school employees.

The tests would not involve drug testing but would promote early detection of physical disorders, such as anemia and diabetes, which may affect an employee's job performance, school officials said.

"It would be just like a fringe benefit," Ricardo said of the proposed program.

The tests would be performed by a local hospital.