BESE member wants diploma test dropped if exemptions signed

By JOHN LaPLANTE
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The new diploma test for public school students should be abolished if it can’t be imposed on private school students, a member of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education said Thursday.

Huel Perkins of Baton Rouge said he will ask the board to throw out the long-awaited graduation exam if Gov. Buddy Roemer signs bills exempting private schools from it.

“I support the test, but not if it’s going to be ... administered to the ‘haves’ and not the ‘haves,’ ” Perkins said.

Perkins believes that imposing the test on public high schools while exempting overwhelmingly white and affluent private schools would further divide the races, social classes and education community in Louisiana.

The so-called exit exam, given for the first time in April, requires public school students, in addition to passing all required courses, to take a five-part standard state test given over two years.

Thousands of 10th graders, the first to take the test, failed one or two parts of the test and are due extra instruction to help them catch up. They eventually must pass all five parts to graduate from high school.

The board recently voted to phase in the test for private schools, giving them two years to prepare for it.

But Catholic school interests convinced the Legislature to pass two related bills that prohibit the state from checking the achievement of private school students.

Lawmakers sent Roemer the bills last week but he apparently hasn’t signed them into law. The secretary of state’s office has not received signed copies of the bill from the governor’s office.

Perkins, assistant to the chancellor at LSU, said he went along with the test because he hoped it would improve academic achievement. The test is partly designed to identify low achievers and give them extra help.

“When I came to the board, I was trying to reverse some of these dismal statistics associated with Louisiana, to get off the bottom of all these lists, and I’m prepared to support any approach that moves us out,” he said.

But “if it’s a good idea, it’s a good idea for everybody,” he said. “I don’t know what’s being taught in private schools . . .”

Perkins has placed the item on the agenda for the board’s monthly meeting next Thursday. He said he won’t bring it up if the governor vetoes the bill, or if he has not yet acted on it by then.

However, “If he signs it and it becomes law and we have to abide by it, I want to propose that we do not impose the exit test on anybody,” Perkins said.

Perkins said he doesn’t know if he has enough support on the 11-member board to abolish the test.

“I might not even get a second” to the motion, he said.

Officials of Catholic schools, which enroll most of the nonpublic school students in Louisiana, said the board has no legal right to impose a test on them. If the Legislature hadn’t passed the bill, they said, they would have gone to court to overturn the board’s decision.