BESE says no to home plan

By JOHN LaPLANTE
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The Board of Elementary and Secondary Education went on record Thursday in favor of repealing recently enacted laws that allow parents to teach their children at home without scrutiny by public school officials.

The board also decided to ask Attorney General William Guste to determine whether home study violated the intent of traditional laws requiring every school-age child to attend school.

In recent years the Legislature changed the nature of school attendance by allowing schools to have as few as one student, allowing parents to teach their children at home and removing nearly all reporting requirements for private schools that don't receive government aid.

The result, say some educators, is that the compulsory school attendance law cannot be enforced.

The Louisiana Association of Child Welfare and Attendance Personnel recently asked the Legislature to abolish home study laws. BESE voted to support the association's efforts.

"They (truant officers) don't know the extent of their power to get kids back in school," according to Claire Landry, president of the board.

"The law says they can go to school in their home," she said, but there appears no way to determine whether students actually are being adequately taught by their parents, or whether they are just avoiding school.

Jesse Bankston of Baton Rouge, the only board member to oppose repealing the home study laws, said the board should not assume that all home schools should be abolished.

"Some of these home study programs seem to me to be greatly beneficial," Bankston said. "I don't think we should oppose them categorically."

Many parents who run home schools say their children learn more from the personalized instruction, and that home schools foster closer families.

Rep. Louis "Woody" Jenkins, D-Baton Rouge, who sponsored many of the recent changes in the school laws, has said his intent was to deregulate education by allowing parents to decide how their children should be educated.

The board also voted to ask Guste for his advice on how the home study laws affect the compulsory attendance law passed in 1964.

In other action at its regular meeting Thursday, the board:
- Accepted a proposal from Bankston to require all public school students to pass a one-semester course in computer technology before graduating. The education superintendent has appointed a task force to study the development of such a course. A committee of the board will begin considering the proposal next month.
- Accepted for study the final version of a new code of ethics for teachers. The code was drawn by the Teaching Professions Practices Commission. The board's approval would give the code more status and encourage local school boards — who have final say on such matters — to adopt its provisions for their own teachers.
- Voted to ask the attorney general's office for a legal opinion regarding the conduct of board meetings. Last month the board held an unannounced, closed-door meeting, reportedly to discuss procedures for electing officers. The request for a legal opinion is a response to press reports questioning the propriety of the secret meeting.

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