Board OKs seven-period school day

By ANGIE FRANCALANCIA

The School Board on Thursday approved the seven-period day for all middle and high school students and, at the request of teachers' groups, capped the teachers' per-day class load at 150 students.

The 150-student cap was 10 fewer students than what the School Board staff had recommended. Superintendent of Schools Raymond Arveson said the lower cap would cost between $1.2 million and $1.4 million to implement.

Some board and staff members said they didn't think the additional funds would be available.

The board also approved moving up starting and ending times for all grade levels by 15 minutes. It also approved adopting two series of textbooks for all grades throughout the parish.

Nine of the board members were persuaded by teacher groups to vote for the lower per-day cap. Board President Press Robinson and board members Jim Talbot and L.L. Hines voted against it.

“I don't think it's fiscally responsible for us to try to reduce the pupil-teacher ratio,” said Robinson.

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ratio when we’re looking at cuts,” Talbot said.

Robinson agreed with Talbot.

“I want to remind the board members that they should be cognizant of the fact that there is a possibility we may get a decrease from the state. Like Mr. Talbot, I do think this is the way to go, but I can’t support it now,” Robinson said.

The School Board members who supported the lower pupil-teacher ratio said they did so with the understanding that “if we have the money, we have it. If we don’t, we’ll have to cut,” board member Frank Millican said.

Despite the possibility of state cuts and reduced income from sales tax, teacher groups said they felt the new ratio would be implemented.

“If they feel strongly enough about it, they can come up with the money,” said Mildred Harris, president of the East Baton Rouge Parish Association of Educators.

The teacher group representatives said the lower cap was the best way to improve the quality of education.

“The East Baton Rouge Federation of Teachers is for the seven-period day,” said Eileen Shieber, president of EBRFT. “We maintain that teachers only have to teach five periods and a maximum of 150 students per teacher. To ask a teacher to teach six periods a day is detrimental to the learning situation. Those who say adjustments can occur are fooling themselves.

“Perhaps, in order to achieve this goal, we might consider that every supervisor and supervising teacher take on one teaching class,” Shieber said.

Jerry Epperson, principal at Baker High School, told the board the cap should be placed for the average children.

“The most effective means of improving instruction is to reduce the number of students in our classrooms. Now, we’ve done this on either end of the scale, but we still continue to throw those average students into large classes, and those are the ones that bear the brunt of the smaller classes at the other ends,” Epperson said.

The board did not consider mandating that teachers teach no more than five periods a day because 150 students could fill five, six or seven periods, Arveson said.

He said capping the teacher’s schedules at five periods a day would cost the school system anywhere from $4 million to $5 million in additional teachers’ salaries.

But Arveson has noted a teacher who has to teach more than five periods each day would have the benefit of having fewer students in each class.

The board voted unanimously to begin the school day for all grade levels 15 minutes earlier than during the 1985-86 school year.

That means elementary students, who start the school day this year at 9 a.m. and end at 3:15 p.m., will begin at 8:45 a.m. and end at 3 p.m.

Middle school students, who now begin at 7:45 a.m. and end at 2:30 p.m., will begin at 7:30 a.m. and end at 1:15 p.m. High school students, who now begin at 7:45 a.m. and end at 2:45 p.m., will begin at 7:30 a.m. and end at 2:20 p.m.

The high school day will be 10 minutes shorter so buses that make routes at both the high school level and at the elementary level will have enough time for both routes.

Director of High Schools Ernie Murphree said the 10 minutes would not be taken out of academic time or lunch time.

In other action, the board approved adopting two series of books in each subject for the parish.

The move was a compromise made in committee between single-adoption and multi-adopter, which the parish had previously.

Associate Superintendent of Instruction Donald Hoover said single-text adoption was the only way to eliminate old textbooks from the system, but that he wouldn’t mind adopting two.

In the future, teachers will not be able to order texts from previous years’ lists as they have done previously.