Majority opposes adding class hours

Teachers make good schools, most say

By DOUG MYERS
Capitol news bureau

While most voters consider Louisiana’s public education system to be in serious need of help, the majority doesn’t believe added class time for students is the answer, according to The Advocate’s year-end poll.

When asked their opinions of several options frequently proposed in the name of education improvement, voters turned thumbs down on longer school days and longer school years.

However, they are more receptive to offering alternative curricula for students headed for the work place rather than to college and to voucher plans that would let parents decide where to send their children to school.

But, above all, a majority of the voters said good teachers are the most important ingredient in the making of a good school.

In The Advocate’s year-end poll, voters were asked a number of questions about education and about ideas frequently discussed for improving the quality of public schools. Here’s what voters say about various education improvement ideas:

- Voters slapped at longer days and school years for students.

  Only 36 percent of the respondents think a longer school year would improve education in Louisiana, compared with 28 percent who think it would worsen it and 31 percent who say education quality would stay about the same.

  Even fewer — 20 percent — say a longer school day would improve public schools, while 36 percent say it would worsen education and 41 percent say education would remain about the same.

  Voters are overwhelmingly receptive to the idea of

What can be done to improve the education system?

Voters were given four choices and asked whether the idea would improve, worsen or leave the education system unchanged.

- Three-track system
  - Improve: 8.6%
  - Worsen: 10.6%
  - Stay same: 8.6%
  - Don’t know, refused: 72.1%

- Longer school days
  - Improve: 40.8%
  - Worsen: 35.5%
  - Stay same: 19.7%
  - Don’t know, refused: 4.08%

- Longer school year
  - Improve: 38.4%
  - Worsen: 30.9%
  - Stay same: 27.8%
  - Don’t know, refused: 5.2%

- Voucher system
  - Favor: 49.0%
  - Oppose: 38.8%
  - Don’t know, refused: 12.6%

What’s the most important factor in having a good school?

- Most Important
  - Good teachers: 51.2%
  - Interested parents: 34.8%
  - Good principal: 6.4%
  - Don’t know, refused: 7.5%
implementing a three-track system for students: one for the college-bound students, a less-rigorous one for students not planning on college and a vocational-technical program.

Seventy-two percent say such a system would improve education in Louisiana compared with only 9 percent saying it would worsen it and 11 percent who say education quality would remain the same.

"A three-track system was overwhelmingly popular with every group measured," pollster Ed Renwick said.

- Slightly less than half of the voters polled favor a voucher system in which the state allows a certain amount of money per student for education. Under a voucher plan, parents can use that money for public, private or parochial schools.

Forty-nine percent of voters favor a voucher system, 38 percent of the voters oppose it and 13 percent do not know or refused to comment.

Vouchers had the most support in metropolitan New Orleans and among 18- to 29-year-olds. In those groups, 58 percent support such a system. The most favorable marks from a religious affiliation come from Catholics, 56 percent of whom favor vouchers.

- Good teachers got the nod over good principals and interested parents as voters' choice of "the most important factor in having a good school."

Fifty-one percent of those responding said the most important of the three is good teachers, followed by interested parents at 35 percent and a good principal at 6 percent. The remaining 8 percent do not know or refused to answer.

The higher the level of education achieved, the more likely voters are to believe interested parents are most important, reaching 44 percent among post college graduates.

While 38 percent of whites and 28 percent of the blacks consider interested parents as most important, 50 percent of whites and 54 percent of blacks chose good teachers as the most important factor.

All of those education issues have been the subject of action by state lawmakers and education policy-setters in recent years.

The Legislature rejected attempts last year to lengthen the school day from 5½ hours a day and to extend the school year from a minimum of 175 days.

Education Superintendent Wilmer Cody, who stepped down Monday, said "more knowledgeable" voters favor moves to lengthen class time for students.

"My guess is that as time goes on, an increasing percentage of the respondents would think that a longer school year and a longer school day are good ideas," Cody said.

The idea of providing more curriculum options for students, which had widespread support among those voters polled, was given a boost last year when the Legislature passed a bill by Sen. Randy Ewing, D-Quitman.

The Ewing measure mandates that the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education come up with an alternative high school curriculum for non-college bound students no later than July 1.

The Ewing measure prohibits tracking — that is, forcing students into one curriculum option — and mandates that all the options include the study of science and mathematics.

Critics attacked the Ewing plan — and similar proposals — as something to water down Louisiana's tough high school graduation requirements. They say that students, given a choice, will opt for easier courses whenever possible and that all students should be expected to become proficient in math, science and language skills.

Ewing and backers of his plan said Louisiana's current high school graduation requirements, described by some as the toughest in the country, discourage less gifted students and contribute to the state's high drop-out rate.

In addition to passing an exit exam, all public school students must pass 23 units of course work, including three units of mathematics, four units of English, three units of social studies, three units of science, two units of physical education, one-half unit of computer literacy and seven and one-half units of electives. A unit is equal to one year of daily classes.

Students can take vocational technical classes, but only as electives. Beginning in 1992-93, BESE will drop the half-unit of computer literacy, since that is being taught in elementary school, and will allow students eight units of electives.

Cody, nevertheless, said students have the opportunity to "put their own programs together in terms of their interests."

"The problem is the absence of the large number of courses that are needed," Cody said. He said two ways to expand the offerings would be to make more courses available via satellite television and to open post-secondary vocational schools to some high school students.

Cody agreed with voters that teachers are the most important ingredient in a good school.

"I would modify it by saying interested parents and a good principal are important and a good principal especially can make good teachers even better," Cody said. "But clearly from my point of view, the most important variable is effective teachers in the classroom.

"They're the ones who teach kids. The other folks are in supportive roles."