School law imposes few standards

Home schools only certify and ‘private schools’ don’t do that

By GREG GARLAND

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Sponsored by conservative state Rep. Louis “Woody” Jenkins, D-Baton Rouge, Louisiana’s home study law, passed in 1980, allows parents to teach their children at home largely independent of any government control.

A parent has simply to fill out a single-page application form which, along with a birth certificate, is sent to the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. By law, BESE must grant approval.

The law originated through a redefinition of what constitutes a “school”, previously defined as an institution with at least 50 pupils staffed by certified teachers. Those requirements were dropped.

Jenkins, who declined interview requests, explained in 1980 that his measure would keep parents who send their children to small church schools from violating the state’s school attendance law.

The legislation passed easily by a vote of 89-2.

But the new law also made home schooling legal. Concerns about that issue and the lack of standards in the statute led to repeal efforts in 1981 by then-state Rep. V.J. Bella, Berwick.

“I don’t think a lot of guys knew what they were voting for” when Jenkins’ bill moved easily through the Legislature, Bella said in 1981.

That attempt to overturn the law and later repeal efforts spearheaded by state Rep. Alphonse Jackson, D-Shreveport, were unsuccessful. Jackson has strongly opposed the home-schooling law.

“I think the genesis of the law is racist,” Jackson said. “The original motivation for that law came when we started desegregating schools. A lot of people were trying to find alternatives to sending their children to integrated schools.”

Although repeal efforts were unsuccessful, changes were made in 1984 to the home study law that were intended to provide some degree of regulation.

As the law exists now, parents must certify to BESE that they are offering a sustained curriculum of a quality at least equal to the public schools and that the program operates for at least 180 days a year.

The state does not monitor home study programs to determine if parents actually follow the guidelines, but parents are required to document their children are making progress when they submit renewal applications.

That can be accomplished in one of several ways.

The parents can send in the results of a standardized test showing their child has scored at or above grade level, submit a statement from a certified teacher or turn in copies of the student’s work and similar materials.

The state department of education administrator whose office handles home study applications, Barry Solar, and his predecessor, Dean Frost, said they are unaware of any case in which a parent has failed to qualify.

By establishing a private school in their home, parents can avoid even the minimal requirements already cited. They only have to notify the state that their school exists and list the number of students enrolled.

The process is explained in a handout the Louisiana Department of Education distributes to parents who apply for home-study programs.

“In Louisiana, parents can teach their children at home with no government regulations if they start a school in their home,” the handout says. “A parent or a group of parents can start a private school with as few as one student.”

Solar said his office does not keep enrollment statistics for such private, unregulated schools, but said most parents who teach their children at home apply under the regular home-study program.

State records show 41 home-schooled East Baton Rouge Parish students are registered private schools since the mid-1980s, some of which apparently are no longer operating.

Among the schools were “Excellerated Learning School,” “Freemans Academy” and “No Compromise Christian School.”

The notification letters sent in by the private schools frequently did not list the names of students or their ages. Some — like the Parkview Christian Academy — included even less information.

The Parkview Christian Academy’s notification letter did not include an address for the school, the names of the parents or the names of the students being taught there.

“I am sending this letter to inform you that we will continue to operate our private school in the name of Parkview Christian Academy with 18 students enrolled,” the handwritten letter stated.

It was signed, “Sincerely yours, Parkview Christian Academy.”