Black leaders urge La. not to appeal ‘exit exam’

By DOUG MYERS
Capitol news bureau

Black leaders urged Gov. Edwin Edwards and Attorney General Richard Ieyoub to see that the state doesn’t appeal a court ruling that declared Louisiana’s high school graduation test unconstitutional.

Sen. Charles Jones, chairman of the Louisiana Legislative Black Caucus, said Tuesday that the state shouldn’t “waste money” appealing District Judge Joseph Keogh’s decision that the test has been unconstitutionally administered by the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Last week Keogh ruled BESE has violated the “equal protection” clauses of the state and federal constitutions because some students—namely, private and parochial school pupils and students who are taught at home—are not required to pass to graduate.

The ultimate decision on whether to appeal the ruling rests with BESE, which sets policy for the state’s 66 public school systems.

BESE President John Bertrand said the board will decide Thursday what course of action to take. Bertrand said he expects the board to instruct Ieyoub to appeal the case to the state Supreme Court.

BESE is preparing for a large crowd of exit exam opponents expected at Thursday’s meeting.

The board is being defended by lawyers from Ieyoub’s office, and the governor has three appointees on the 11-member board — including two representatives of the state’s largest teacher organizations and a Catholic school official.

BESE has no money in its budget to hire an attorney to handle what would turn out to be an expensive defense of the test, a spokeswoman for the board said Tuesday.

Sen. Jones, D-Monroe, said a meeting is scheduled for today with the governor and attorney general. Edwards declined to comment Tuesday and a spokesman for Ieyoub said the ultimate decision on whether to appeal rests with BESE.

“This is not a race issue,” Jones said. “This is a fairness issue.”

Jones said it is not fair for students to complete 12 years of schooling, pass all the necessary courses and then fail to get a diploma solely because of the exit exam.

“Imagine what it does to self-esteem to do 12 years, make passing grades and still be denied the reward dangled in front of you for 12 years,” said Rupert Richardson, state president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Rather than appeal the decision, Jones said Ieyoub and Edwards should work with members of BESE and the Legislature to try to devise a test that is “fair and equitable.”

Jones made the remarks during a news conference Tuesday at the Capitol. He did not attend but took part in the question-and-answer session via telephone.

Attorney Ernest Johnson, left, talks with the media Tuesday as black leaders asked state officials not to appeal a judge’s ruling declaring the high school exit exam unconstitutional. Next to Johnson are state Rep. Naomi Farve and state Sen. John Guidry.

Exam

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More than 500 public high school seniors passed the necessary courses but weren't able to graduate because they could not pass all parts of the exit test.

To earn a diploma, public high school students must pass all five sections of the test in addition to earning 23 course credits.

High school students take math, English and written composition sections of the exam as sophomores and the science and social studies sections as juniors. They can repeat the sections of the test until they pass.