An Analysis

(EDITOR'S NOTE: The dispute over establishing a community college in Acadiana arises again in light of technical institutes around the state erecting new signs proclaiming their status as part of the Louisiana Technical College system.)

By Mike Hasten
State Editor

BATON ROUGE — If Louisiana is to ever have a true community college system, its going to take a massive change of heart among the people in charge, or more likely, hard ball politics.

Those are the assessments of the main players in this year’s battle for full fight over establishing a community college system in Acadiana.

It was a fight that was frustrating and downright ugly and personal, yet somehow, insiders say, Rep. Jerry LeBlanc, who authored the ill-fated proposal, says he hopes to avoid such battles next time - but butt the bill.

Vocal school officials in the Department of Education blame James Caillier, head of the University of Louisiana system, for the death of the proposal on the Senate floor because he was stubborn and not willing to compromise.

LeBlanc said a lot of people should be blamed, not just himself, for the bill dying. He said Caillier shouldn’t be blamed because “It was not his place to compromise. It was not his bill.”

In fact, LeBlanc said, Caillier was not consulted until long after the bill was drafted and being debated.

Tom Dykes, superintendent of vocational education, labeled Caillier a “liar” who convinced legislators he was going to his way or no way and sold “a bill of goods to politicians who don’t know education.”

Caillier says blaming him is “a cop-out.”

Vocational schools wanted to fully control community colleges, which he says would have worked because they wouldn’t really be colleges. Students who completed course work would find that their credits were not transferable because vocational college are not accredited.

LeBlanc said vocational school officials don’t like Caillier because he has been successful at solving problems, which he says is important. The “They’re mad about him taking over Nunez (vocational college) and creating a community college out of nothing.”

Caillier is also transforming Delgado into a viable community college.

They want to remove the bill and allow them to “bump them out” - declare vocational schools colleges - Caillier said. And now that the threat of a community college system being created is out of the way for a while, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) implemented its plan.

When the change comes a new approach, directors of the vocational-technical system avow they’re combining technical skills with academic credits and agreements that could allow their courses to be transferred to four-year universities.

Caillier, the head of the state’s largest system of universities, says that simply calling the schools colleges doesn’t make them capable of providing a college education.

“The action by BESE changes nothing,” said Caillier. “A rose by any other name is still a rose. These are still vocational-technical schools.”

LeBlanc said his and other Academic lawmakers efforts died because of “ petty politics and turf battles.”

His plan, which would have converted Lafayette area technical schools to vocational-technical schools, was called for the transfer of the campuses from BESE to the Board of Trustees for State Colleges and Universities, now the University of Louisiana System.

Wayne Meaux, dean of the College of Education and a cooperative agreement with the University of Texas at Austin, said the opposition was going to be there, particularly BESE, he said. “They act as if they’re not the taxpayers - own the building. Was unfair.”

When the bill hit the House, the delegation stuck together and fought opposition with a no-nonsense attitude. LeBlanc said. When it got to the Senate “little by little, special interests worked their way into the legislation. That’s why we had to amend them, the more it began to unravel.”

When the bill stalled, a “hybrid” was proposed, LeBlanc said. It was a compromise from USL but the university would not administer the community college or control the curriculum. Caillier “had reservations about that,” LeBlanc said. and he and others decided their “11th-hour suggestion was not well thought out,” so it was dropped.

The final blow, LeBlanc said, was when Sen. Donald Cravins withdrew support, even after the delegation “bent over backwards” to satisfy his demands to change the name, guarantee protection of vo-tech employees and maintain a vocational-technical role in the state’s education system.

There is a place for vocational-technical education, Caillier said. “Universities, community colleges and vocational schools are different institutions with different purposes. Just don’t co-mingle the three.”