Clausen considering alternative testing strategies

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Education Superintendent Tom Clausen is considering alternatives to a state testing program that will cost twice as much money this year as last year — if the Legislature approves the money.

Former Superintendent Kelly Nix praised the three-year-old program — known as minimum competency testing — as the most important educational reform since the days of the New Deal, but critics say the tests are too easy.

Meanwhile, a committee of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education is considering how to implement a new rule that will require students to pass an 11th grade test before they receive a high school diploma.

"If all we're going to do is have the MCT (minimum competency test) again at the 11th grade level, then it's absolutely useless," board member Jack Pellegrin of Houma, a critic of the testing program, told the committee Thursday.

The tests are supposed to ensure that, before students are promoted, they learn the minimum amount of knowledge necessary in one grade to be able to handle the next grade.

Nix and supporters of the program said it eventually will end social promotions — sending a student to the next grade no

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matter how little he has learned.

Clausen says the program, by stressing minimum standards, will breed mediocrity in public education.

In his campaign against Nix last fall, Clausen charged that the testing program "doomed all of our children to live at the minimum level of achievement."

Susanne Tripplett, director of evaluation for the Department of Education, told the committee that she has been ordered to study "alternative testing strategies" for Louisiana's public schools.

She said she will make a report to Clausen within about two months.

Under the 1979 state law that set up the program, students who fail a standardized test in math and language must be given extra instruction during the summer, after school or during the school day.

Last year most 2nd- and 3rd-graders in public schools took the tests. About 7 percent of 2nd graders, and about 17 percent of 3rd graders, were the 75 percent passing score on one or both parts of the test.

This year, about 30 percent of the state's 4th graders are expected to fail the 80 percent passing score set by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Last year the remedial instruction for 2nd and 3rd graders cost about $5 million.

The cost of providing remedial instruction for students in 2nd through 4th grades is expected to exceed $10 million, according to Bill Davis, state director of elementary education.

However, Davis said the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education has proposed a budget that includes $7.8 million for remediation.

To provide extra instruction to all students who will be eligible for remediation, the department would have to ask the Legislature to add more than $2 million to the proposed budget.

Gov. Edwards has promised that education will be a high priority during his administration, but Edwards said increased funding will hinge on whether he can convince the Legislature to approve hundreds of millions of dollars in new taxes during a special session beginning next week.

Davis said the testing program will become more expensive since the law requires that another grade be added each year until, by 1992, students take the competency test before graduating from high school.

Last month officials in the outgoing Nix administration proposed scaling down the program, perhaps giving students a test in only four grades rather than every year from 2nd through 12th grade.

Clausen is considering that recommendation.

However, the board, which has final say on educational policies, recently voted to move up the graduation test by four years, requiring next fall's 6th graders to pass a functional literacy test before they can graduate in 1998.

Students would take the test in 11th grade, giving them time to take it again as a senior if they failed it.

The board has not defined "functional literacy" nor begun the process of developing or choosing a test.

Pellegrin said the board has a lot of time since no one will take the test for a few years.  

Lambert said the board could consider the test again next fall.  

The state department of education includes the estimated cost per student of remedial instruction in the cost of the test.