Clausen, Sen. Johnston disagree on quality of Louisiana education

By JOHN LaPLANTE
Capitol news bureau

NEW ORLEANS — Two top state officials cited some of the same statistics but came up with sharply different conclusions on the quality of Louisiana education Friday in separate speeches to local school officials.

U.S. Sen. Bennett Johnston, D-La., said schooling in Louisiana lags far behind other states — and other countries. But Education Superintendent Tom Clausen said critics are ignoring some of the positive achievements of the state’s public schools.

“You’re not doing a bad job,” Clausen told several hundred persons attending the annual convention of the Louisiana School Boards Association.

But Johnston, in a later speech to the same group, said: “Louisiana is going to be playing catch-up ball, educationally, for the next few years.”

Johnston cited the state’s high dropout rate and illiteracy rate to illustrate his point that “we are not getting full potential from our citizens.”

American schools don’t stress math, science and other subjects necessary for the United States to compete in a high-tech world, and Louisiana residents are even less educated than the U.S. average, Johnston said.

He cited an anti-intellectual attitude that has people

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“congratulating ourselves that we are not good at math and science.”

Clausen said the state’s dropout rate appears to be the highest in the nation because graduation figures do not include a large number of people who leave school but later earn a high school equivalency diploma.

Louisiana scores on the American College Test are lower than the national average because about two-thirds of the state’s high school seniors take the test, Clausen said.

In Wisconsin, the state with the highest ACT scores, only about one-third of the students take the ACT, he said.

Clausen listed several school programs in Louisiana that have been nationally recognized, including a kindergarten program in Baton Rouge. If Louisiana has an education problem, it can be blamed on money and so-called reformers who interfere with the school policies, Clausen said.

Louisiana’s teacher salaries rank 44th in the nation, he said.

“How can we expect quality education?” Clausen told the school board members.

Clausen said the state needs more money for education “even if we have to sell Girl Scout cookies.”

Johnston agreed that “school reform, unfortunately, will take more money,” and both the state and federal governments are facing deficits that could reduce aid to education.

But, Johnston said, even more money won’t solve the problem until people accept that school deficiencies exist and attack them realistically.

On Thursday Gov. Edwin Edwards asked the school board members to support his plan for raising more money to retain education and other state programs — legalizing casino gambling and establishing a state lottery.

Edwards “almost made a convert out of me,” Clausen said.

“I have never been one of the governor’s big fans,” but Edwards is sincere in trying to solve state government’s budget crunch, Clausen said.

Clausen did not endorse the governor’s gambling package, but the superintendent said that, since he has no alternative to propose, he will not criticize Edwards’ plan.

Legislators who oppose the governor’s package should come up with their own proposals to solve the state’s financial problems, Clausen said.