Clausen wants elementary standards upgraded

By JOHN LaPLANTE
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LAFAYETTE — Tom Clausen, incoming superintendent of education, said Thursday he will concentrate more on improving instruction in the lower grades than demanding more achievement from students in high school.

“We can’t be teaching for minimum standards at the elementary grades and expect competency at the high school level,” Clausen told members of the Louisiana School Boards Association.

Clausen has often criticized the state’s basic skills testing program, which is supposed to determine whether a student has learned the minimum amount necessary to handle the next grade.

The program is now administered in the 2nd through 4th grades.

Clausen said the state should instead require students to attend kindergarten — perhaps even before they are five years old — and provide more teachers to reduce the size of classes in grades 1 through 3, before significantly raising the requirements for high school graduation.

The Board of Elementary and Secondary Education recently voted to require Louisiana public high school students to take more and tougher academic courses — including geometry and chemistry — to earn a high school diploma.

“I applaud BESE on its stand,” for higher standards, Clausen told the school officials. “But I’m not sure they didn’t go too fast.”

He said he will ask the board, before taking a final vote on the policy in April, to modify the tougher requirements and allow those requirements to take affect more gradually. As written, the new policy will affect students beginning 9th grade this fall.

“Give me more time to monitor each parish” to see what school districts will need to implement the higher standards, Clausen said.

“He said that giving students a better foundation in the lower grades is more important than requiring higher standards in high school.

Clausen, a longtime teacher and school administrator, acknowledged that the education profession must accept some blame for the problems of education in Louisiana.

He said part of the solution lies in “getting the teachers off their duffs and taking care of their responsibilities.”

He had earlier made an almost identical statement about school principals.

“We do have some incompetent teachers in our classrooms, and we can get them out,” Clausen said.

One way to weed out bad teachers, he said, is to better train principals on how they can legally remove a teacher.

Clausen said he and Gov.-elect Edwin Edwards have discussed the idea of a “principals’ academy,” which would educate new principals on their powers and responsibilities.

The superintendent-elect said good principals are the key to good public schools.

“I’ve never seen a good school with a bad principal, or a bad school with a good principal,” Clausen said.

“Discipline is still the No. 1 problem” in schools, he said, “and that’s up to the principal.”

Clausen also promised to work closely with local school officials.

“We’re going to have controlled direction coming out of the Department of Education instead of mass confusion,” he said.

During his campaign against outgoing Superintendent Kelly Nix, Clausen often complained that the incumbent provided little leadership for public education.

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