Education goals list ambitious but possible, La. officials say

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- Cut the high school dropout rate in half.
- Raise student achievement scores to the national average.
- Prepare every young student — even the most deprived — to compete equally in first grade.
- Increase the number of graduates from state colleges that offer only courses that have been proven worthwhile.

Those lofty goals, and others proposed by a regional research group, are far beyond the current reality of Louisiana schools and colleges, which top policy makers admit rank near the bottom among the states.

But many of the goals are within Louisiana’s grasp if citizens and political leaders finally commit themselves to better schools, those same policy makers said.

The effort would demand lots of money and constant vigilance, but it’s crucial to the future of 4.5 million Louisiana residents, they said.

“It will take ... more of a commitment than has ever existed before,” said Education Superintendent Wilmer Cody.

But, “The whole quality of life is more linked to education now than it ever was in the past,” Cody said. “This state will not grow economically by offering cheap labor. This state will grow by offering an educated, informed population.”

The Southern Regional Education Board, which advises 15 states on education issues, recently suggested a dozen benchmarks for states to gauge the success of their expensive, highly
touted school improvement programs.

The SREB report, "Goals for Education: Challenge 2000," offers specific goals, such as a 90-percent literate adult population, and broad guidelines, such as competitively setting teacher salaries, to increase educational quality by the end of the century.

"We should see that the educational reforms of the 1980s lead to significant improvements throughout the 1990s and into the 21st century," SREB president Winfred Godwin said in releasing the report.

The goals are ambitious because "Doing a bit better than last year is not good enough" in an increasingly competitive world economy, Godwin said.

The program is especially ambitious for Louisiana because "we're the bottom," said state Rep. Jimmy D. Long, D-Natchitoches, longtime chairman of the House Education Committee and a member of the SREB advisory committee.

"We can catch up quickly because other states already have proven what programs really make schools better," said Keith Johnson, president of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, which sets public school policies and runs state trade schools.

"Other states jumped in feet first into all kinds of programmatic changes," Johnson said. "Even though Louisiana is behind, we also sit in a good position because we can look at results in other states.

The opportunity is enhanced by an interested governor, a new education superintendent and a mostly-new policy making board, Johnson said. "We can no longer wait for things to happen. We have to go out and make things happen," he said.

The word "commitment" cropped up repeatedly when policy makers were asked how the state can hope to reach lofty heights of academic excellence.

"We must maintain our commitment no matter what," said Stephanie Desselle, education adviser to Gov. Roemer, who sponsored a long list of long-range education programs during his first legislative session.

Adequate money is crucial, Desselle said. The Roemer package so far will cost taxpayers about $300 million a year, mostly for pay raises for public school teachers.

Careful planning also is vital, she said. "We have to be very specific with our goals and where funding needs to be," she said.

Finally, reformers engaged in debates over budgets and bureaucracies must remember that the key to good schools is better instruction and more learning in each classroom, Desselle said.

Not all the goals can be reached by the end of the century, several leaders said.

For instance, according to the 1980 U.S. census, about 57 percent of Louisiana adults had a high school diploma or equivalent. SREB suggests that 90 percent of adults should have a high school education by 2000.

That would require educating about 850,000 illiterate or semi-literate adults in a little more than a decade.


Adult education programs with small budgets have reached tens of thousands of knowledge-seeking adults, but the state couldn't hope to educate such a high portion of the population in so short a time, Picard said.

Other goals, such as boosting pre-school programs to ensure all students are ready for first grade work, are well within reach, he said.

Nearly all students attend kindergarten, Picard said, and pilot programs for 4-year-olds have been very successful and are slowly expanding.

At this point, the major obstacle to earlier schooling is "getting parents to see the worth of education" and breaking an attitude among some parents that "I'm going to keep my baby at home as long as possible," Picard said.

Picard said tax reform — such as the tax plan that failed in a special session last week — is essential to provide the money and economic climate necessary to address the more expensive education goals.

"If we don't do that, I don't think Louisiana is ever going to be in a position to reform education," he said.