Education plan given by Edwards

By Mike Hasten
State Editor

BATON ROUGE — Gov. Edwin Edwards unveiled an education plan Tuesday that he says is drastically needed but he admits that the state does not have the money to fund it.

The plan focuses on early childhood education, at-risk youths, effective administration and job preparedness.

In a speech before the Public Affairs Research Council (PAR) Tuesday night, Edwards asked for help in securing funds for education by approving a constitutional convention that will address fiscal affairs of the state. He said PAR, which has been the most vocal critic of staging such a convention, could be a driving force in getting it approved by the Legislature and in getting public approval of the changes that will be addressed.

"If you're for better education, you've got to be for the convention," he told PAR.

"We do not have all the money we need to implement this plan immediately," Edwards told reporters before addressing PAR, but he hopes to be able to raise the money by shifting tax burdens and generating new revenues.

The governor said some changes will be able to be funded in this year's budget, despite an impending deficit.

He said $40 million will be funneled into the Minimum Foundation Program for funding public schools to equalize funding between poor and rich parishes. The poor parishes will have to earn the extra money, though, by improving schools.

The governor's budget also includes an additional $2 million (total $5 million) that will fund bonds to finance up to $20 million in loans for middle class college students who do not qualify under other loan programs.

Scholarships also will be boosted, he said, including a program that grants free tuition to the state's top 5 percent high school graduates by 1994.

Putting more money into early childhood development reaps a five-to-one reward in savings from reducing the need for prisons, unemployment benefits, teenage pregnancy assistance and drug treatment, he said.

"There are children from poorer neighborhoods who get into first grade without knowing which end of a toothbrush goes into their mouths," Edwards told PAR.

The governor said he also wants to avoid cuts to higher education and "at least maintain a level of expenditure for college-level faculty." He also wants to pump more money into maintenance of buildings that are falling apart because of neglect.

Education should benefit from the lottery, he said, indicating he wants 75 percent of the state proceeds to go to education. Video poker should produce between $40 million and $75 million in licenses and fees, he said.

Getting the money through the Legislature will not be easy, he said, but "We will just pinch and squeeze and claw and scrape until we get it done."

The education package includes a military-type school for problem students. The school is to be developed through the National Guard.

Teacher pay will not die, the governor predicts, but neither will it survive in its present state. Edwards said evaluation should not punish anyone and instead "the idea is to help them become better teachers. We already have 6,000 in our schools without teacher certificates so rather than worry about uncertifying those that have a certificate, let's see what we can do with the 6,000 that are already in the schools without a certificate."

Teacher evaluations should "identify the teacher that is a problem in the classroom and more that teacher over a three or four-year period of time to become a qualified teacher."

The governor also wants to establish partnerships with businesses to get them more involved in education and to supply better trained workers.