Education reform still prisoner of interest groups

By BILL McMAHON
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More signs of general frustration with Louisiana education and its failure to allocate funds where they are needed continue to surface.

Those wanting education improvement as a base to build the state's economy and improve the lives of its citizens find dealing with education's problems is like wrestling an octopus. There are just too many tentacles of influence out there.

Business interests agreed last week public education needs money, but also agreed too much is spent outside the classroom. Legislators expressed some of their concerns as they argued over how funds should be shifted from other concerns as they argued over how funds should be shifted from the expenditure Reilly, D-Baton Rouge, noted the problem of state expenditures on bus transportation totals $111.5 million this year. Even more in local money is spent outside the classroom, said Murphy. "You could buy them an automobile cheaper," he said. But there is a reluctance by lawmakers to react positively on what they know. The state also chooses to give $6 million for the state's financial plight. Politicians, perhaps the number of employees -- bus drivers -- is even more significant.

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"We have an inordinate amount of expenditure," for buses, lunches, administration and other spending outside the classroom, said Murphy. "We are starving the classrooms and the classroom teacher, and we're fattening the bus drivers and the principals," he said.

And in a legislative committee, state Rep. Kevin Reilly, R-Baton Rouge, noted the problems of eliminating or reducing the peripheral and unnecessary. "We ought to zero in on some programs that should be reviewed and we ought to stop listening to bureaucrats who have vested interests," he said.

Specifically, the powerful House Appropriations Committee chairman named his barbs at the Department of Education, which, he said, "duplicate(s) what 64 parish school systems are doing," at a cost of $50 million.

"In Alabama, they spend $2,000 per pupil while we spend $2,800. Yet, they start teachers at $18,000 and we start them at $12,200. We need some answers. We need some whys," said the committee chairman.

For Reilly and other legislators, and for those concerned with rejuvenating the state's economy, now at a foundering stage, there are some answers and some whys out there.

But there is a reluctance by lawmakers to react positively on what they know. Earlier this year, a legislative panel was told a horror story about a school bus carrying eight school-related students from Livingston Parish. The story included a driver's fee of $1,250,707. That comes out to an average annual cost of $19,271. That comes out to an average annual cost of $129,000.

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