Edwards eyes education changes

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Gov. Edwards says he wants to raise standards for high school graduation, improve vocational education, restrict admission to state universities and adopt a new salary schedule that could include merit pay for teachers.

But, just over a week before the Legislature convenes, Edwards still isn’t ready to reveal many specifics of his plan to improve education — a high priority for his new administration.

“Everything I’ve said... is subject to change,” he said in an interview.

The governor specifically promised that education will have first shot at any extra money in the state budget.

However, he cautioned parents, students and educators not to expect many expensive improvements this year.

“I’m going to be grappling with the Legislature for the next 90 days trying to get enough funds to keep programs now in place, much less these new programs,” he said.

Edwards is still mulling the recommendations of his advisers on education. But in a wide-ranging discussion about education, he listed several ideas that he is considering:

- Louisiana teachers, whom Edwards once promised would eventually be paid among the top 25 percent in the nation, will have to settle for less than the immediate 10 percent raise he also promised them last year.

  Bringing Louisiana teacher salaries into the top quarter in the country would cost an estimated $500 million, he said. A 10 percent raise for all state and school employees would cost $250 million — more than the state can afford this year — he said.

  However, Edwards acknowledged that “one of the indispensable things” in a good educational system “is a pay level for teachers that encourages the brighter students... to become teachers... and encourages them to remain as teachers.”

  Teachers haven’t had a general pay raise since 1982.

- The $90 million Professional Improvement Program for teachers should be phased out and replaced by a “career ladder” approach that might base pay raises on merit rather than just seniority and college degrees.

  “For instance, we might consider grading schools rather than teachers,” hinging pay raises on students’ improved

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Edwards: "We would like to establish a kind of West Point for principals..."

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... preparing to meet higher standards. LSU already has adopted general admission requirements, requiring students to take courses such as trigonometry and computer science in order to enroll at the Baton Rouge campus, beginning in 1988.

Edwards said a limited type of selective admissions could be spread to other universities around the state. For instance, he said, "Louisiana Tech may be limited in the number of engineering students and other schools may have excellence in certain programs where we may want to have selective admissions..."

"We have one major university - the LSU system - but many other schools have better programs in certain areas than the LSU system," he said.

He also stressed that no selective admissions plan should affect any student who already is attending the school.

The state has agreed, in settling the higher education desegregation case, to keep its policy of open admissions at least until September, 1987.

"All children should have an opportunity to attend kindergarten, but they should not be required to attend. I would like to at least make it available for those parents who want their children to get the benefit of an early start," he said.

The size of classes should be reduced in the lower grades. While there is a lot of discussion pro and con about the value of lowering the student-teacher ratio, Edwards said a little more of the one-on-one contact would be good for students.

School principals should attend a training school regularly to learn new techniques.

Edwards would like to establish a kind of West Point for principals, maybe on a regional basis, where they could speed six weeks at state expense, and then pay to hone up on their own skills and to be taught new technology and new teaching skills that they can take back to their schools.

There's an old adage in education that there are really no bad schools with good principals or good schools with bad principals.

The superintendent of education should be appointed, but that won't happen any time soon, Edwards said, because the current superintendent opposes the change and "people generally like to elect their public officials."
Reform

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decision to local school districts.

The Louisiana Association of Educators suggests that states that allow local control of curriculum are more successful.

When opposing the higher graduation requirements last month, LAE produced a list of five states whose students had the highest average scores on the American College Test, the major standardized test taken by college-bound students in Louisiana.

None of those states set more than minimal guidelines for high school graduation, LAE said. Three of them — Nebraska, Wisconsin and Colorado — don’t tell local schools what to teach at all.

“These statistics seem to show that merely increasing the number of units ... (or) Increasing the number of specified courses that are required for graduation will not alone improve education,” LAE said.

In Nebraska, state officials are proud of their students’ scores on the ACT.

However, the Board of Education is expected, sometime this year, to adopt some state standards for the first time.

Merlin Menagh, director of school approval for the Nebraska department of education, said most students already are taking most of the courses that would be required by a plan recommended by a governor’s study commission.

But, he said, political pressures probably will cause the plan to be watered down before it is adopted.