Edwards says
La. education
getting better

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Gov. Edwin Edwards, insisting that gambling isn't his only interest during his current term, talked Friday about how much he thinks has been done to improve education over the past 20 months.

Edwards said the state is "little by little, in a very definite way, improving education," accepting credit for the revamp of the statewide and local teacher evaluation programs and the increase of $70 million in public school funding over two years.

However, the four-term governor acknowledged much more needs to be done, including raising teacher salaries and continuing efforts to end the trend that half of all students drop out before finishing Louisiana's public schools.

Edwards made the remarks after receiving a grade of "B" on his progress report from a group formed almost two years ago to advise him on education priorities.

"I appreciate the B,' but I think I would prefer an "F" with a request that I repeat (for four more years)," Edwards joked.

Although Edwards received good marks, the group talked of areas for improvement, including setting programs in place to give teachers "time to plan" and recruiting more minority teachers.

Edwards said he is aware of the problems and what needs to be done in education — adding that he wishes the media would play up the fact that he is interested in areas other than gambling.

But the other topics, the four-term governor said, just aren't as "titillating" as gambling.

"Gambling is not what consumes me," Edwards said.

Meanwhile, the group praised the Edwards administration for its handling of the statewide teacher evaluation program, which the Legislature suspended after teacher unions complained that it was unfair and unworkable.

The new program calls for only new teachers to be evaluated by the state. Experienced teachers will be evaluated by local districts, based on new state criteria.

The focus is on "professional development" rather than booting bad teachers from the classroom.

In its 14-page report, the group praised Edwards for, among other things:

- Establishing an accountability system to ensure that at least 70 percent of the $1.8 billion school funding formula gets "into classrooms."

The Legislature appropriated more than $850,000 to develop a system of accountability.

- Increasing money allocated for students considered to be "at risk" of dropping out of school.

Funding for at-risk 4-year-olds increased from $2.8 million during the 1991-92 fiscal year to $36.2 million during the 1992-93 fiscal year.