Heir to the Throne

You probably didn’t feel the earth move last Saturday when the CODOFIL board named Dr. John Avery Bertrand of Crowley its vice chairman, but it did. In so doing, CODOFIL has designated this soft-spoken educator as heir apparent to James Domengeaux, CODOFIL’s founder, spiritual father and sole chairman since 1968.

It was on the school grounds that the opening shot of this language war was fired (with the 1920 prohibition against speaking French at school), and it is on the school grounds that the CODOFIL crusade will be won or lost. So it is not surprising that in searching for a new source of leadership to augment the rapidly diminishing energies of the decidedly irreplaceable Jimmie Domengeaux, CODOFIL looked for and found its dauphin from the very school system it has been seeking to change for 15 years.

Bertrand’s professional credentials in the field of education are intact. After graduating summa cum laude from SLI in 1950, Bertrand went on to earn an M.S. degree in geography from LSU and received his Ph.D. in educational administration from the University of Texas in 1966. He has been a classroom teacher, a school principal on the elementary, junior high and high school levels, a college teacher and a superintendent of schools. And, probably most important in terms of power, in 1983 Bertrand was elected to the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, the very panel which determines curricula in Louisiana schools.

Last year, Bertrand helped lead the fight to get BESE to mandate the teaching of a second language in all Louisiana school systems from the fourth through eighth grades. He is now pushing for legislative funding (about $5 million for the first year) of that mandate, and hopes to get it from the state’s windfall 8g settlement.

Like Domengeaux, Bertrand has an understanding of the global scope of CODOFIL’s mission: “We’re the only major industrialized nation in the world which doesn’t train their children in second languages,” he said.

But unlike Domengeaux, Bertrand has a soldier’s eye view of Louisiana’s educational front lines and thus has a first hand grasp of the political intricacies ahead. He is encouraged that, although not funded by the state, the BESE mandate has been voluntarily complied with to a varying degree by a number of school systems, about 35 out of 66 to be exact. It’s the “varying degree” that bothers Bertrand. “As an educator, I feel very strongly that having it (second language class) one year and not following through

Bertrand: “In better shape today.”

with it is not much better than never having it at all.”

Some school systems object to adding second language programs because there simply aren’t enough classroom hours in the day. But when BESE added an extra 30 minutes to the school day, LAE successfully lobbied the legislature to get it rescinded. Given his professional background, if Bertrand can’t battle his way through this sort of opposition on CODOFIL’s behalf, it would seem no one can.

Bertrand regards the current status of the second language fight not as a crisis but as a continuation of a long struggle. Bertrand: “I think we’re in better shape today than we were, thanks to Mr. Domengeaux who nearly singlehandedly brought it where it is today.”

—A.W.