Illiteracy root of crime, judge says

By MIKE DUNNE
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If gubernatorial candidates want to get tough on crime, they need to spend money on education—not more prisons—a district judge said here Monday.

District Judge Bob Downing told the Baton Rouge Press Club that the crime problem is the result of a poor education system. Candidates are letting themselves be lead by polls, which are being shaped by people who are the nation's most illiterate, Downing said.

"The No. 1 problem in Louisiana is illiteracy. You can reduce crime by reducing illiteracy," Downing said. Education leaders must emphasize teaching skills that help people find jobs, Downing said. As an example, he said students don't learn how to use an electrical circuit tester, which might save their lives and translate into a job skill. "How many people ever died because they didn't know who Shakespeare was?" he asked.

The state incarcerates more people per capita than any other state in the nation and more than countries such as the old Soviet Union, South Africa and China, Downing said. If a high rate of incarceration works "then which state should be the safest? If incarceration reduces crime, why doesn't it work?"

Downing talked about a variety of education and alternative sentencing programs that he said would help reduce the number of people who return to jail or help young people headed for a life of crime to choose another career.

When offenders begin to learn a useful skill, their behavior changes, Downing said. "They get a job, and they start liking school," he said.

Despite the fact that alternatives work, conservatives continue to push ideas that do not match their philosophy. Once they are exposed to alternatives and the costs, they will opt for more alternatives. "Mortar, concrete and razor wire" prisons should be only for the worst of offenders, which is actually about 5 percent of all offenders, he said.

Incarceration doesn't work and is very expensive. Alternatives that do work sound less attractive but are...