Louisiana schools to see changes this year

New requirements in curriculum and class attendance awaiting returning students

By JOHN LAPIANTE
Capitol news bureau

Tougher courses and smaller classes will greet some Louisiana students when they return to school this month.

But other students may be more aware of new rules that could prevent them from leaving class for pep rallies, track meets, student assemblies, club meetings and other activities that traditionally have distracted from instructional time.

After months of intense debate over school standards, the Legislature and the Board of Elementary Education have adopted a long list of changes in state education policies.

However, most of the reforms won't take effect this year. They require more money, more study or more time to phase into the public school system.

The board has shown some willingness to compromise on the issue. Last month the board tentatively approved a plan proposed by the Louisiana High School Athletic Association that would allow students to leave class early, when necessary, to travel to away games.

Non-athletic field trips, athletic contests and teacher conferences also are on the table.

The rule allows teachers to use class time for so-called co-curricular activities, including field trips, but Fourier warns, "It's got to be related to what they're studying in class."

"It's a fine line to draw. If the biology class takes a field trip to the zoo, this would be co-curricular. If the music class goes to the zoo, that's extracurricular" and not allowed during class time, Mrs. Landry said.

Mrs. Landry said the rule may need some refining and some exceptions. Her elementary and secondary committee will take up the issue Tuesday, in time for the board to take action at its monthly meeting Thursday.

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No matter what the board does, Fourier said the success of the rule still will rest with local school officials.

It's up to the local officials to enforce the rule, he said.

A companion measure, adopted at the same board meeting last April, would have increased minimum instructional time in public schools from 5 1/2 to 6 hours a day.

But the board, facing intense pressure from Gov. Edwards, the Legislature and the education community, delayed that rule for at least another year.

Mrs. Landry said the longer school day is not as important as the extracurricular rule.

"If we can stick by this, I feel like you will be adding more instructional time by not pulling them out of class for extracurriculars," she said.

Although students may be spending more time in class, they may not notice much difference in what they're being taught this fall.

Students in 10th, 11th and 12th grades are not subject to the new graduation requirements, and the tougher elementary school curriculum won't begin being phased in until next year.

Most affected this year are the ninth-graders, who will be required to take several courses, including Algebra I, that previously had been reserved mostly for students planning to attend college.

The ninth-graders don't have to take the course in their first year of high school, but if they put it off until next year they may get behind since even tougher courses will be required before graduation.

Frank Norris, director of textbooks for the Department of Education, said all school systems have had at least three chances to order more math books to accommodate increased enrollment in algebra.

Some school systems have retrained teachers to handle the extra classes.

The biggest fear among education officials is that students might not be ready for the tougher courses.

That's one reason the board is studying improvements in the elementary curriculum, too, hoping to improve their preparation for college.

The most immediate change is an extra $10 million provided by the Legislature to hire more teachers in kindergarten through third grades, lowering the state funding ratio from 24 students for each teacher to 22 students for each teacher.

That doesn't mean no lower elementary class will exceed 22 students. In fact, the maximum class size was lowered only slightly, from 30 to 29 students.

But within each school system the average size of classes in the lower grades may not exceed 22 students, according to Joe Kyle, assistant superintendent of education in charge of finance.