LFT backs revenue reforms
Teachers support lottery, lowered homestead exemption

By LORI CHANDLER
Advocate staff writer

METAIRIE — The Louisiana Federation of Teachers voiced support Tuesday for a state lottery and lowered homestead exemption to raise money for education.

The teachers’ union said it supports lowering the homestead exemption and implementing a local income tax to raise money for education.

“A number of revenue-raising proposals have been advanced, including a lottery and casino gambling. While the LFT is willing to support all of the revenue proposals advanced to date, the union believes that two . . . should be given serious consideration,” the LFT said.

“They are the lowering of the homestead exemption and the imposition of local income taxes. Revenue reform is at the heart of school reform. It is time that the citizenry of this state abandon the notion that Louisiana can offer quality public service without additional revenues.”

The state constitution now forbids local governments to impose income taxes on workers.

The teachers’ group, which is affiliated with the AFL-CIO and represents more than 11,000 Louisiana classroom teachers, also urged the Legislature to raise beginning teacher salaries from $12,000 to $19,000 a year and to see that teachers with a bachelor’s degree earn $38,000 after seven years’ experience.

The proposals were part of a seven-page position paper compiled by the LFT’s executive committee. The group approved the report on the last session of its three-day convention.

A resolution supporting the lottery said that teachers need salary increases, up-to-date textbooks and materials, and asked that the LFT support legislation for a lottery to finance public education.

While there have been some improvements in public education, the group said, those changes have been “piecemeal.”

The LFT also suggested that teachers be involved in education reform.

“Most actions taken thus far have been knee-jerk and quick-fix,” the report said. “This panic approach has led to the adoption of several poorly conceived measures which have had to undergo countless revisions. As a result, Louisiana schools have been left coping with the revisions and not implementing real reforms.”

“Those who have had a hand in denying teachers a meaningful place in the reform movement justified their actions by characterizing teachers as a narrow-minded special-interest group with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo,” the report added.

The group said concerns such as salaries, programs for low-achieving students, stronger legislation on student discipline, and expanded financing at the state and local level should be addressed.

The proposal calls for politicians and businesses to work with the education community on reform.

“The aim of education reform in Louisiana should not be merely to catch up, the proposal said.

“As long as we are content to catch up, we will instead fall further behind while those states which genuinely value education move further ahead,” the group’s report said.

LFT President Carrel Epling said in an earlier address that the state does not have the commitment to education that is necessary for success.

“You must push the political powers for reforming this state,” Epling said. “The governor must be fully committed to education. He should not be just a talker, but a leader.”

Some of the LFT’s proposals for reform include:

• Establishing committees of classroom teachers and administrators to review problems with low achievement, poor discipline and textbooks, and curriculum.

• Reducing class size to allow no more than an 18-to-1 ratio in kindergarten through third grade and no more than a 23-to-1 ratio in fourth through sixth grade. For middle and high schools, the daily class load should not exceed 150.

• Providing alternative curricula for elementary students who are reading one or two years below grade level.

• Giving additional state financing to schools with more numbers of economically disadvantaged students.

• Providing alternative education for chronically disruptive children.

The proposal supports more incentives to recruit new teachers, such as financing scholarships and loans, making salaries more competitive, internships and teacher education foundation.

However, the group said current proposals, such as merit pay, recertification and vouchers work to the “detriment of our educational system.”

“Recertification is a negative concept not found in other professions. The LFT favors maintaining the lifetime certificate.”