Louisiana’s education system hurt by politics, study says

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — A heavy dose of politics in Louisiana’s education system may be hurting the quality of instruction in the state’s public schools according to a study released by Tulane University’s Center for Legal Studies on Intergovernmental Relations.

In short, what we have is a mess,” said Louis F. Miron, the study’s principal author and researcher. Louisiana needs a single education official or board that has ultimate authority to set policy, the report said.

The current situation results in a political “free-for-all” between the governor, the Legislature, the state superintendent of education and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, as they all attempt to influence the outcome of final decisions, the report says.

The political infighting is further complicated by the state superintendent being elected and not appointed, said Miron.

The study says Louisiana is the only state in the country that elects both the state board and the superintendent.

“Because the state superintendent is elected, he is really only accountable to the voters,” Miron said.

As a consequence, he said, political officials and interest groups such as business and labor are dictating educational policy more than educators.

“The end result may well be less academic achievement among students in public classrooms,” according to the report, entitled “Education Policy in Louisiana: A Discussion Paper.”

The Center for Legal Studies on Intergovernmental Relations, which is part of the Tulane University Law School, is financed by the state Legislature to identify problems of public importance and to advise the Legislature on how to solve them.

The report suggests streamlining the administrative hierarchy in education to allow for a more coherent educational policy giving either the governor or BESE absolute authority over education in Louisiana.

“I feel very strongly that the report is very accurate,” BESE member David Simitiere said.

Lee Gary, director of the Business Task Force on Education, said the report is “right on target.” He said the study’s findings and recommendations are “thorough, sound and candid.”