New group tackles education problems

Educators, lawmakers, businessmen join forces

By CARL REDMAN
Capitol news bureau

Louisiana got another education interest group Tuesday when the representatives of a number of special-interest groups formed the Committee United for Education.

The new group emerged from an ad hoc meeting called by LSU Education Dean Charles W. “Billy” Smith to “try to see if we can take a diverse group of opinions and form a coalition that might come forth with recommendations to improve public education...primarily at the elementary and secondary levels.”

CUE will continue meeting through the fall and winter in an attempt to hammer out a consensus education-improvement package in time for next spring’s legislative session, Smith said.

The group includes representatives from some of the top education groups in the state, including such organizations as Education for a New Louisiana, Louisiana Association of Educators, Louisiana School Boards Association, American Federation of Teachers, Louisiana Association of School Superintendents, the state Parent Teacher Association, Louisiana Association of Principals, Louisiana Council of Deans of Education and others.

Both the House and Senate education committees are represented, as well as the state Department of Education, the governor’s office, the AFL-CIO, the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry and the Public Affairs Research Council.

Smith said the group seems enthusiastic about putting together an education package but added there also seems to be “some reluctance that we can come to grips with some of the tough issues.”

Members of the fledgling CUE organization have agreed that it will take two-thirds vote before anything can be recommended to the Legislature, Smith said.

State Rep. Jimmy Long, D-Natchitoches, said he doubts that the group can reach unanimous agreement on what steps should be taken to improve education in the state.

But Long said the group can reach “an overwhelming consensus” and begin getting its message out well ahead of the 1986 legislative session.

Long said CUE is one of four such committees currently at work on education packages and added such early involvement maybe the answer to one of the major problems encountered during this year’s session.

“We waited until the last minute to get started,” Long said. “This kind of meeting must take place all year. We waited until the last three or four weeks before the session to get our package together. This year we will have our package ready early.”

Long said he and a handful of other legislators have already begun their own sessions aimed at producing an education package.

At this morning’s gathering, participants ranked 13 educational issues in order of importance and LSU Professor Jonathan Shapiro ran the rankings through a computer to find where the group was in greatest agreement.

The ad hoc panel ranked teacher salaries as the most important educational issue facing the state. Rounding out the top five issues were instructional accountability, administrative leadership, teacher supply and parental involvement — in that order.

When CUE meets again later this month, the group will focus its attention on the teacher pay issue because it was ranked as the top education issue and because it will likely touch on many other issues, Smith said.