State officials delayed action on proposed tougher graduation rules for high school graduation Thursday after educators from all over the state spoke against the changes.

"I think the whole educational system would be thrown into convulsions if we adopted this right now," said Claire Landry of Arabi, president of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Business and education leaders backing the changes said the national push for higher educational standards can no longer be ignored. They said all students should be required to take courses such as algebra and chemistry.

But representatives of teacher groups and school administrators warned that the new rules would increase the dropout rate, cost more money, aggravate the current teacher shortage and penalize average students not planning to go to college.

The board voted 8-2 to postpone action on the standards, which were recommended by the board's education committee last week. The issue will be discussed again at a special board meeting Jan. 25.

"We have to do something... We can't stick our heads in the sand and think this thing will go away," said board member John Bertrand of Crowley, a local school superintendent, who supports the changes.

He criticized his colleagues for opposing the tougher curriculum.

"All I'm hearing is, 'I'm for higher standards but let's leave everything like it is,'" Bertrand said.

One after another, educators packing the board's meeting room repeated the argument that — although they said they favor higher standards — the new standards would wreak havoc in public schools.

The new rules would require students to take more and tougher courses in English, math, science and social studies. Two years of foreign language also would be required.

Several speakers said there aren't enough teachers available to teach more specialized courses, and that many teachers qualified to teach only electives, such as business math and speech, would be out of a job.

They urged further study on the effects of the proposed standards before they are approved.

"I don't want to come back here in five years and say, 'What are we going to do with the 80 percent of the students who aren't graduating?'" said Zachary High School principal Jerry Boudreaux.

Boudreaux and others said that most students couldn't pass the tougher courses, which traditionally have been associated with a college preparatory curriculum.

"We turn out a lot of farmers" who don't need all those courses, said Emile Chiquet, principal at Donaldsonville High School.

"I apologize for not turning out all doctors and lawyers," he said, but "we need to give all the average people a chance."

The board at first considered a motion to delay action until March or April — too late to make the proposed standards effective for students entering high school next fall.

Edward Steimel, president of the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry and a major backer of the new standards, urged quicker action.

"Don't delay it for a year," he said, because that would perpetuate what he said is an inadequate educational system that is cheating students out of an education.

"Do something for this year's eighth graders," he said. "Don't waste them, too."

Board member David Sinitiere said he is "deathly afraid of the signal" the board is sending to the public by not acting on the higher standards.

He said further study is not necessary because 16 public hearings were held before the education committee made its recommendation.

However, several speakers said the hearings concentrated on less drastic changes to the state's handbook for school administrators. They said the changes before the board Thursday were not debated by the public.

The board voted to meet as a committee of the whole on Jan. 25. Final action could come at the regular monthly board meeting the following day.