Panel blasts education chief for evaluation flaws

By DOUG MYERS
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A joint legislative subcommittee blasted Louisiana Education Superintendent Wilmer Cody on Thursday for not ensuring a better job was done setting up and implementing the new statewide teacher evaluation program.

In recent months, the controversial program has been under constant fire from the state’s two largest teacher unions — the Louisiana Association of Educators and the Louisiana Federation of Teachers — for being “unfair and unreliable.”

Members of the Joint Subcommittee on Elementary and Secondary Education jumped on the evaluation-bashing bandwagon, spending about an hour whipping Cody for assuring them last year everything was all right with the program.

Some state education officials semi-jokingly referred to the committee’s treatment of Cody as the “St. Valentine’s Day Massacre.”

“If it (teacher evaluation) was so good, why didn’t we take enough time to do it?” state Rep. Francis Thompson, D-Delhi, asked Cody.

Thompson said he was upset that Cody last year told legislators, “Everything’s OK. We’ve got a few problems, but we’re going to work those out.”

“Someone has dropped the ball,” Thompson said, “and certainly it’s not the Legislature because all we did was give you an opportunity to develop an (evaluation) instrument.”

Answering Thompson’s complaints, Cody agreed there have been “problems” but not “major problems” with the setting up and implementation of the centerpiece of Gov. Buddy Roemer’s 1988 Children First Act.

“Albert Einstein could not have taught in Louisiana with the way the law is set up right now,” said state Rep. Bernard Carrier, D-Denham Springs.

“We’re getting so much feedback on it I think it is going to get slowed down,” said state Rep. Billy W. Montgomery, D-Vacherie.

Cody

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Haughton. “If we don’t do something between now and April 15, there’s going to be some bills in that’s going to be hard to deal with,”

The regular legislative session begins in mid-April.

State Sen. Armand Brinkhaus, D-Sunset, has promised the LAE and the LFT he will sponsor legislation to kill the program. Brinkhaus, a Joint subcommittee member, is chairman of the Senate Education Committee.

Cody, nevertheless, said he is conducting meetings throughout the state with teachers to identify problems with the program and plans on making some recommendations for change to the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education later this month.

Additional recommendations will be presented to BESE in March.

However, Cody’s comments did not allay committee members’ concerns. They criticized Cody for assuring them a pilot year for the initial year of statewide evaluations was not necessary.

“I feel we weren’t ready,” said state Rep. Tommy Warner, D-Chalmette. “I believe a pilot year would have been the best year with teacher participation, and when they participated, I think then they could say, ‘We’ve gone through this and looked at the other teachers in the state and we think that this is now a valid instrument and valid evaluation and all teachers should be able to go through it.’

“And, those teachers who can’t cut the mustard, so to speak, then they shouldn’t be with us. I think we missed the boat on that.”

Cody disagreed, saying the instrument used to evaluate teachers “is a product of what the teachers of this state — in large numbers — said all teachers ought to be able to do.”

He said 6,000 of the state’s 44,000-plus teachers were surveyed and 2,000 responded.

“I think the problems we’re having has to do with the support and help and assistance of teachers to get ready for the thing,” Cody said. He said the state should orient the program to “help everybody succeed” and not toward “finding out how many fall.”

Subcommittee members, nonetheless, said changes to evaluation system should be made before the Legislature convenes in regular session.

Rep. Roy Brun, R-Shreveport, said time is running out. He called on the LFT and the LAE to offer ways to improve the program.

“Show us by example what is right rather than spending 100 percent of the time trying to tear down what is in place,” Brun said.

LAE President Linda Daysaid her group would push for a local evaluation system modeled after similar plans now in place in 66 school districts. LFT President Fred Skelton said his group would have recommendations in time for the lawmaking session.

“I’ve been in the field for 22 years and I have never seen teachers as angry,” Daysaid.

Polly Broussard, executive director of Associated Professional Educators of Louisiana, said while her group favors statewide evaluation, changes are needed.

“Because we believe teaching is a public trust, we cannot recommend the demise of this program,” Broussard said. “But major changes are needed. Teachers cannot go through another year like this one.”

The teacher evaluation program called for abolishing lifetime teaching certificates and requires public school teachers to prove their competence periodically to keep their jobs.

Teachers deemed incompetent are to be given extra help. Unsatisfactory teachers who do not improve were supposed to lose their teaching certificates.

A district court judge recently ruled that BESE cannot revoke lifetime teaching certificates, but education department officials are looking into withholding state funds in cases of teachers who do not pass their evaluations.

Roemer said Thursday if teachers are legally able to keep their certification to work after failing evaluations then they won’t be paid by the state.

“How can I pay taxpayer money to a teacher who can’t teach?” Roemer asked. “... How could I walk down the street and meet an 8-year-old child and tell them, ‘I’ve sent your mom and dad’s money to a teacher who can’t teach?’ I won’t do that. It’s not right.”

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