Private schools react to BESE requirements

The Board of Elementary and Secondary Education's decision to toughen high school graduation requirements drew mixed reactions from private and parochial school officials in East Baton Rouge Parish.

But they said they anticipate no problems in adjusting their programs to meet BESE's requirements.

Views were mixed on whether the new requirements will improve the quality of education in Louisiana. Some said they think the new requirements will improve education, but others are skeptical and questioned the impact on students not headed for college.

Patrick Kennedy, assistant superintendent for the Baton Rouge Catholic Diocese said he talked to several principals of Catholic high schools and they said they do not anticipate any serious problems in adjusting to the new requirements.

"None of the principals I've talked to think this is going to be an earth-shaking thing," Kennedy said. "None of them think it's going to be a major problem in their schools."

Kennedy said the new graduation requirements will require some adjustments, however, since all students now will be required to take advanced courses such as Algebra II, chemistry and geometry.

But Kennedy said about half the students in parochial schools already are taking these courses, so it should not be a major problem to solve. He said the diocese may have to hire an additional teacher or two because of the changes.

"We are doing so much in the school along these lines already that it is not going to be a big change for us," Kennedy said.

Spokesmen for Trafton Academy, Episcopal High School and Parkview Baptist High School also said they anticipate no serious problems in adjusting to the new graduation requirements.

There was a mixed response from private school officials on whether they like the new graduation requirements and whether they think they will improve the quality of education in Louisiana.

Other private school officials said they had reservations about requiring all students to take an essentially college-bound type course of study.

Nancy Rust, Trafton's assistant principal of academics, said she is concerned for non-college-bound students who may not be able to cope with difficult math and science courses such as chemistry, Algebra II and geometry.

Mrs. Rust said Trafton is concerned about the regulations because the school has a "diverse student body" that includes some students who do not plan to go on to college or who aren't capable of going to college.

The Rev. Paul Hancock, headmaster of Episcopal High School, agreed, saying that the impact of the standards on his school will be minimal since almost all the students at Episcopal are college-bound.

Hancock and Mrs. Rust said the new BESE requirements along with LSU's new entrance requirements are prompting them to adjust their programs somewhat.

Each school already offers the courses required under the new guidelines, but will have to counsel students on what they need to take and expand classes in some subject areas.

The principal of Parkview Baptist High School said he thinks the tougher requirements are a step in the right direction to improving the quality of education in Louisiana.

"I've seen too many youngsters go to LSU improperly prepared, and they're unsuccessful," said Parkview Principal David Walker.

"I think it's (been) too long coming," Walker said. "I personally favored the dual diploma system. . . . I know we've let high school students go through the years and graduate with almost nothing."

Walker, however, said he is not sure the new graduation requirements will remain intact as they are phased in over the next four years. He said he expects BESE to modify the requirements before next year's ninth-graders reach their senior year.