Proposals made to upgrade education

By JOHN LaPLANTE
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A high education official is proposing dual diplomas, a longer school year, less testing, smaller classes and easier requirements for teacher certification as part of a $121 million plan to upgrade public education.

Students would go to school — and teachers would get paid — for 18 months of class rather than nine, suggests Robert Gaston, deputy superintendent of the state Department of Education.

Classes in the lower elementary grades would be smaller to improve instruction at the beginning of a student's school career, Gaston said.

At the other end, graduation requirements would be increased for all high school students, and special diplomas would be awarded to students who take an even tougher college-preparatory curriculum.

While the school system is adjusting to the higher standards, some teachers would be allowed to teach out of their field of training, and non-education majors would be certified to teach, Gaston said.

The current ambitious statewide testing program would be scaled down. Extra pay for teachers would account for nearly all of the estimated $121 million cost of the changes.

Gaston said he hopes his plan will be viewed as a first step toward a comprehensive, practical solution to current problems.

Concern over educational quality — heightened by a presidential commission that last year warned of "a rising tide of mediocrity" in the nation's public schools — has sparked more debate in recent weeks.

Figures released this month by federal officials showed Louisiana is near the bottom on standardized tests scores, and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education will decide on Jan. 31 whether to sharply increase requirements for high school graduation.

Gaston said he has taken his plan to politicians and educators around the state, including Gov.-elect Edwin Edwards and has gotten good response.

Gaston also said he doesn't expect the sweeping changes to be enacted without amendment.

"What I'm trying to do is just put something on the table," he said.

Many of the items in the plan have been mentioned before, but most proposals address only one or two areas of the educational system without taking into account their effects on other areas.

Gaston said his plan — and he stressed that it is his own plan, not a product of the Department of Education — also takes into account political realities.

For instance, he said, many teachers may not favor some of the changes, but if they may accept the whole plan if it includes a pay raise, then perhaps something can be put on the table.

"It is my hope that the Legislature will act on it," he said.

Gaston is a 23-year educator who has (See DIPLOMAS, 4B)
Diplomas

(Continued from 18)

been running the Department of Education since it was being
Education Superintendent Kelly Nix, who has only occasionally appeared for
work, will be last in a re-election
last October.
Gaston is not expected to stay on in the
post after his re-election, since
Superintendent Tom Clause, but he has
been actively involved in the many
closed-door discussions on
suggestions of the new superintendent, particularly in the Edwards
organization.
Gaston's plan includes the forming
of an attendance district, Louisiana time. When
students take a standard curriculum, then
for those intending to go
to college.
Open admission policies allow any
high school graduate to enter a
Louisiana university, but Gaston said
students undergoing the college-prep
curriculum could be given first at
scholarships and the raised
expectations to encourage them to take the tougher
course of study.

The curriculum would require
students to take the courses now
required, plus biology, algebra, and a
third foreign language, in addition to
a college-prep diploma a student, in addition,
would be required to take
personal achievement of a
Georgia high of basic English, two years of foreign
language and a third year of science, including
chemistry.

The basic diploma would require
23 course units and the college-prep
diploma would require 24 units.

Students could now graduate by earning
22 units.

- Since the state does not have enough
qualified teachers to handle the larger number of
tougher courses, teachers displaced by the decreased
number of elective classes in the new program would
be encouraged to teach out of their fields for a time while
they go back to school to earn certification.

Current teachers who get certified in
high-demand areas such as foreign
language, science and math could receive a
one-time $2,000 bonus.

In another effort to relieve the
teaching shortage, college graduates
with a 3.0 grade point average would be
certified to teach without being required
to take many education courses.

- The year was just expanded from 180 to
200 days — from nine to 12 months.
Students who earn a B in their classwork would be
excused from 10 days a year as an incentive and to set
aside 10 days for teachers to help slower students
in the classroom.

Teachers would be paid
appropriately for the extra days,
resulting in a raise of approximately 10
percent.

- Students would have to pass a
college readiness test, 11th-grade skills test
before they can graduate.

Rather than give standardized tests to
all students, the state has decided, as
envisioned in the state's current basic
skills testing plan, testing would be
restricted to grades 3, 6, 8, and 11.
However, the testing schedule would be
lightened. Rather than phase the
testing in, the plan is to begin the
coming year, 1972, seniors would have to pass the
test at graduation.

Student who failed the tests would
be required to take remedial
class. As of now, the cost is
about $2.5 million a year.

- Maximum class size in grades
Kindergarten through 3 would be
25 students, but class size in grades 4-12 can
now include up to 30 students. Hiring
the extra teachers to lower the class size
would cost about $30 million a year.