Right to Learn sees voucher system as means to improve public schools

By PAUL KEDINGER
Editor

"We want to give public schools competition," emphasized Fannie Godwin, project coordinator for the Right to Learn Committee, as she briefly outlined the goals of the statewide organization for members of the local Rotary Club Tuesday.

Right to Learn’s goal is to allow parents to choose the best school for their children by giving them a state-funded voucher or scholarship they can redeem at any eligible public, private or parochial school.

"It’s not our goal to destroy public schools," she remarked. However, she presented statistics she argued showed the public school system was destroying itself by failing to do its job.

"Children in Louisiana are doing worst than years ago," she said, citing reports that Louisiana has the highest illiteracy rate in the nation, and four of out every 10 eighth graders will currently drop out before completing high school.

Though educational reforms are attempted every four to five years, Godwin asked, "Why doesn’t reform work?"

Answering her rhetorical question, Godwin cited the fact that public education operates like a monopoly with a captured audience and is guaranteed funding "even if it doesn’t produce."

That would change under the voucher system, said the Right to Learn spokeswoman. Where parents would be allowed to enroll their children wherever they believed they would receive the best education, Godwin predicts inadequate school administration and teachers would quickly be motivated to improve teaching.

Godwin revealed that Right to Learn is currently drafting legislation to be introduced in the upcoming legislative session. "The plan will have to be phased in," she admitted, but stressed the ultimate goal "was to see every parent have the right to exercise an option."

She suggested the voucher plan might be phased in by grade level, geographic area, income levels or combination of criteria.

She dismissed a public school argument that their task was unattainable because the majority of their students were born poor and black. "If we believe that, we’re in poor shape," she told the Rotarians. "If public schools can’t educate them, why not give them the voucher system. They would be any worse off."

Vermont is the only state in America which currently offers a voucher system, she explained. The Vermont voucher system, she added, is limited to the high school level.