A ‘rising tide’ of education reform

Louisiana falls in line with other states in move to raise standards

By JOHN LaPLANTE
Capitol news bureau

The debate over tougher standards in public schools — particularly high schools — is not unique to Louisiana.

Education officials in nearly every state have either adopted, or are considering, proposals that would force students to work harder to earn a high school diploma.

"The movement to improve schooling... has taken root in all 50 states, becoming so well established that the issue is not whether to make changes, but when and how those changes should be made," said Education Week magazine in a report on the results of a national survey of educational issues.

The drive for higher standards was put into focus by the much-publicized report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, which last year warned of "a rising tide of mediocrity" in the nation's schools and urged a broad range of reforms.

But many states, including Louisiana, have been moving toward a stiffer curriculum for some time.

"Since 1980, more than half of the states have raised state high school graduation requirements," according to the Education Commission of the States. In addition, 17 states are currently studying plans to require more courses for high school students, the commission said.

In January, the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education voted to sharply increase graduation requirements despite objections from the education community that the changes are too much too fast.

The board also decided that students must pass a functional literacy test before graduating. If allowed to stand, the new rules would require Louisiana students to take more and tougher courses than most other states require of their high schoolers.

However, the changes are opposed by Gov. Edwards and Education Superintendent Thomas G. Clausen, who favor a less rigorous curriculum that would add about half as many courses as the board wants to add to the mandatory curriculum.

Edwards said he will "use some sweet reason" with the board to convince its members to reduce the requirements when they take a final vote on the new rules in April. Edwards also has two pending appointments to the board to help ensure his wishes are heeded.

"Louisiana already ranks above 35 states in requirements for graduation," Clausen said. He said the state should improve instruction in the early grades before demanding more of students entering in high school.

Despite Clausen's statement, it is difficult to rank the states when discussing high school curricula. There are many variables.

For instance, some states require more math, but less English, than other states. Local school districts may demand more of their students than the state standards require. Also, it's difficult to judge whether one school's biology course, for instance, is as tough as another's.

At first glance, however, the standards being pushed by Louisiana's board appear to be among the toughest in the nation.