Roemer points out strides in education

By DOUG MYERS
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NEW ORLEANS — Gov. Buddy Roemer tooted his own horn here Monday, telling a state teacher union that his administration has done more for education than any other in state history.

Before he took office in March 1988, “Education was sick,” Roemer said.

Since then, graduation rates, state spending, student-teacher ratios and teacher pay have all improved, he said.

Roemer made the statements while addressing the Louisiana Federation of Teachers during its annual convention here. He is scheduled to address the Louisiana Association of Educators on Tuesday in Baton Rouge.

As an example, Roemer said the pupil-teacher ratios in early elementary grades is down to 20-to-1 in most classes, and the next step is to reduce it even more.

And, he said, while ACT scores average only 16.7 statewide, they are up 3.7 percent since he took office.

When he became governor, Roemer said Louisiana had the highest illiteracy rate in the country, but since then he said he has moved to “lift the plague of illiteracy” in the state by establishing an office of illiteracy.

Also, a “strong system” of vocational-technical education is a high priority because the state is not only competing for job-creating industries with neighboring states, but also with Japan, Roemer said.

He said the state, under his guidance, has established a “quick-start” program in which workers are trained at state expense for incoming industries. To date, Roemer said, 18 projects have been funded and 2,000 workers have been trained.

The vo-tech students are “being trained for real jobs in the real world,” he said.

Roemer once again pointed to the average 30 percent increase in teachers’ state base pay as a victory for his administration.

“Professionals deserve to be paid like professionals,” Roemer said, noting the state had spent $484 million since he took office to implement the pay plan.

“Where I’m from, I call that half a billion bucks,” Roemer said.

Roemer said no one has been “deceived or tricked” because that is not the way he does business.

He said teachers knew they would receive a pay hike for evaluation. The new statewide teacher evaluation program began Oct. 1 with one-fifth of the state’s teachers being evaluated.

Teachers who receive poor evaluations have up to two years to improve. If they do not, they are faced with decertification.

Roemer said the children of Louisiana are more important than “you or me. They should be put first,” he said.

The intent of the program was to be effective and fair but not to be part of “organizational rivalries.”

LFT and LAE have both filed lawsuits attacking the constitutionality of the program. Some state education officials, including Roemer’s former education adviser, Stephanie Desselle, have said the lawsuits were filed only because both organizations are in a war for membership.