Roemer tells LFT system of choice can't be avoided

By GREG GARLAND
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The question of allowing parents more choices in the schools their children attend is inevitable as Louisiana goes about reforming its educational system, Gov. Buddy Roemer said Monday.

However, Roemer steered a wide berth around the voucher system being promoted by some of his key supporters. That plan involves giving parents cash vouchers to attend the public or private school of their choice.

"I endorse no plan," Roemer said. "In fact, the plans I see are unworkable."

Roemer's comments about choice came during back-to-back appearances before the Louisiana Federation of Teachers and the Associated Professional Educators of Louisiana, and in brief remarks to reporters.

Roemer told the LFT that the question of choice is bound to arise next year as the state begins grading its schools. Parents aren't going to want to send their children to schools rated a failure, he said.

"It's inevitable — you can't avoid it," Roemer said, referring to the debate over some system of choice. But he stressed that he was not backing any specific plan.

"I don't endorse a plan for choice," Roemer said. "I haven't seen one with which I'm comfortable."

Roemer told reporters that his idea about choice was limited to choice among the public schools children attend. He has said such systems seem to be working well in some other states.

Roemer said a system of choice would be difficult for Louisiana, noting that any system would have to take into account the effects of school desegregation and judicial restraints on student assignments.

Roemer also said it would probably take "several years of debate" before any choice system could be put into place, and said that it would have to be done carefully if a decision is made to go that route.

"It's way too early for Louisiana, but it ought to be discussed," Roemer said. He did not use the term voucher at any time during his remarks on allowing parents greater choice in school assignments.

Some of Roemer's supporters, including Baton Rouge contractor Milton Womack, are pushing for a voucher system that would provide parents with $1,300 to $1,500 vouchers to send their children to the public or private school of their choice.

Womack says the public schools have no incentive to make reforms work without competition. Critics of the plan, like LFT President Fred Skelton, say it is an attempt by the wealthy to have private school education subsidized.

In his address to the LFT and APTEL groups, Roemer gave an upbeat assessment of progress in education during his term in office. He said teacher salaries have been raised each of the past two years and will be raised again next year.

Roemer said he showed his commitment to education when he found money for teacher pay raises at a time when the state was broke and "when things looked their darkest."

Roemer said education holds the key to economic development in the state. He said the state has exploited its natural resources in the past, without diversifying by attracting manufacturing and production plants.

Later, American Federation of Teachers President Albert Shanker warned LFT members that, because of increasing public pressure to improve public schools, "There are going to be more and more radical types of solutions" proposed.

Vouchers and so-called choice systems are among those solutions, he said.

Shanker said the education system, in part, deserves some of the criticism heaped upon it.

American schools do not demand as much of students as do schools in other developed nations, Shanker said.

As a result, he said, relatively few superior students enter American colleges, and few of them become school teachers.

"Half the elementary school teachers in this country don't know much arithmetic, at least not enough to teach the kids," Shanker said. That's because they weren't required to learn much math, he said.

Roemer met with Shanker and other LFT officials for nearly an hour before addressing the LFT convention.