Roemer unveils state ‘Writing to Read’ plan

By JOHN LePLANTE
Capitol news bureau

Gov. Buddy Roemer wants to spend $30 million — half from private sources — for IBM equipment that would carry a popular reading program to every elementary school in Louisiana this fall.

The governor’s latest education initiative embraces a specific multimedia instructional program controlled by IBM and known as “Writing to Read.”

The program employs an array of sensory aids — from computers to modeling clay — designed to let kindergarten and first-grade students pick up reading and writing skills at their own pace, and in their own way.

Los Angeles attorney Richard Riordan is so impressed with the program that his Riordan Foundation apparently is willing to help raise $15 million from private sources to match $15 million Roemer wants to spend from last year’s budget surplus. Riordan has made similar offers in other states.

“We are calling upon private industry to support this effort . . . . to make Louisiana No. 1 in this critical effort,” Roemer told lawmakers as he unveiled the plan Monday.

“This is a powerful program already used by some 130 schools in Louisiana . . . .” he said in an address to a joint meeting of the House and Senate.

“Louisiana would become the first state to achieve complete statewide coverage.”

Roemer said the reading labs might also be available after school for adult education classes, thus multiplying their effect in raising the state’s level of literacy.

By Dennis Stine
Associated Press

Roemer says he’d like to see three programs run by the state.

The governor proposes a $2.5 million budget to operate the entire “literacy delivery system” after the equipment is bought and installed.

Roemer envisions a quick pace of fund raising and implementation for the program, which he dubbed “Project LEARN.”

Gary Patureau, director of the governor’s Office of Literacy, said he hopes the private donations will be arranged by the time the program is debated by the House Appropriations Committee, perhaps in a few weeks.

Patureau said 4,000 elementary school teachers also must be trained during the summer so the program can start operating in all 1,000 elementary schools this fall. He said details of the training program will be worked out soon.

Financed by state or federal grants, about 130 Louisiana schools already use Writing to Read. It’s used in about 2,000 schools nationwide.

“It teaches them to read by teaching them to write,” said Dorothy Smith of Springfield, president of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and a strong supporter of the program.

On a trip to Atlanta at the invitation of IBM, Smith said she, Roemer, Patureau and Education Superintendent Wilmer Cody “saw the same results” in two Atlanta schools.

“It’s geared to each child’s capability,” she said. “He can go as fast as he wants.”

Commissioner of Administration Dennis Stine said spending $30 million with a single company without a specific bidding process is acceptable under state law.

The IBM hardware and software involved in the program already are on state bid lists, he said.

Paul Wax, state purchasing agent for computer equipment, added that, under the law, buying software is not a competitive process. Teaching material is copyrighted, he said, which means it’s available only from a single source.

The program would be a significant addition to the instruction of kindergarten and first-grade students in Louisiana schools. Patureau said students should use the labs for three to five hours a week.

Beth Courtney, director of Louisiana Public Broadcasting, said she has been approached to use LPB’s statewide links to help train the teachers who will help their students use the program.

She said that, so far, plans are sketchy.

“The Writing to Read program is a good program. It works,” she said.

“What we need to focus on is the implementation.”