School voucher plan includes BR

At least 250 youngsters to participate in program

By DOUG MYERS
Capitol news bureau

At least 250 disadvantaged Baton Rouge youngsters will get vouchers averaging $1,000 each to attend private or parochial schools of their choice next fall.

Baton Rouge was selected Monday as one of 38 cities taking part in a privately funded voucher program known as the Children's Scholarship Fund.

Some 1,250 children in New Orleans will participate.

"I'll give them (poorer children) choices that some of the other families that are more affluent have," said Rolfe McCollister Jr., a businessman who is chairing the program's effort in Baton Rouge.

"...We're trying to make sure every kid has an opportunity for a good education." Parents will have to pay some of the costs but could send their children to any private or parochial school that accepts them. The vouchers will be awarded for four years and range from $600 to $1,600 a piece, depending on the income of selected families.

The average tuition is about $1,900 a year at schools in states where the program already has begun.

Children's Scholarship Fund officials estimate half of Baton Rouge's school-age children would meet the qualifications. They are based on income levels that make students eligible for federal free or reduced-price lunch programs.

McCollister said he envisions some schools awarding partial scholarships to their own to help offset how much the parents of poor families have to pay.

Scholarships will be awarded for four years to students entering kindergarten through eighth grade in fall 1999.

"It wouldn't be a one-year, where you'd choose a school, get to go one year and hope to get it the next," McCollister said.

The program is the brainchild of Wal-Mart heir John Walton, one of the richest people in the nation, and leveraged-buyout giant Ted Forstmann.

Walton and Forstmann recently announced they are personally investing $100 million and plan to raise another $100 million in private donations to send 50,000 low-income U.S. children to private and parochial schools.

McCollister said Baton Rouge's business community has pledged to come up with the local share, which amounts to half of the $1 million in scholarships.

More than 100 cities were considered by CSF for funding to get the 38 selected.

"It makes me proud to see Baton Rouge included among these progressive cities -- Charlotte and Dallas and Indianapolis and Portland and Seattle," McCollister said.
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"...This time we get to be part of that leading group that's out there on the leading edge for change rather than following the crowd or ringing the rear," he said.

The program already is accepting applications.

All applicants who meet the qualifications will be considered equally. If more than 250 applicants qualify, a lottery will be held. Participants will be selected in April. Participating schools must be accredited, McCollister said.

Parents wanting to apply for the program should call 1 (800) 905-KIDS for information.

McCollister said he will turn his attention to garnering funds from the business community to meet the pledges and find schools willing to accept scholarship recipients.

Sister Mary Michaeline, superintendent of Catholic schools for the diocese of Baton Rouge, recently said her district would admit participating students to elementary schools that are not full, such as St. Gerard, St. Isadore and St. Francis Xavier.

"At least it will give the parents a choice," said Kirby Ducote, a lobbyist for Catholic and other parochial and private schools.

"This will be the first time that parental choice will determine what the children will get," Ducote said. "Otherwise, they're locked into a monopolistic system ... where you have to go to a certain school."

McCollister said he plans to meet with officials from Episcopal, Dunham, Parkview Baptist, Central Private and University High to encourage participation.

"We want them to have the same options as everyone else," McCollister said.

The program has the support of Gov. Mike Foster, and U.S. Sen. John Breaux, D-La., is a member of the group's national advisory board along with Colin Powell and Barbara Bush.

State Superintendent of Education Cecil Picard recently said he has no problem with the program as long as it doesn't take funds away from public schools, although the state's teacher organizations are strongly against voucher programs.