Shortage of textbooks alarms BSE

By JOHN LaPLANTE
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As many as two out of five Louisiana schoolchildren may lack textbooks because there isn't enough money to buy a book for every child, a state official said Wednesday.

Shocked members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education immediately ordered a survey to determine the extent of the textbook shortage in the state's public schools.

"It's ridiculous. If a child doesn't have a textbook . . . he may as well close up shop and go home," board member David Sinitiere of New Orleans told his colleagues.

Prompted by media reports about students who can't do homework because they can't bring home a textbook, board vice president Claire Landry of Arabi brought up the issue at the board's monthly meeting Wednesday.

The state has long suffered from a shortage of textbooks because the Legislature doesn't provide enough funds for schools to purchase an expensive set of textbooks for every student, J. Frank Norris, director of textbooks for the Department of Education, told the board.

Asked how many students may lack full access to a textbook, Norris said: "Probably 30 percent, maybe 40 percent."

He said his estimate applies to the number of students who can't take home all their textbooks every day but instead have to share books with others taking the same course.

Board members said the state will have to start spending more money on textbooks even if other areas have to be cut.

"It's not a funding problem. We're spending $1 billion on public education, said board member A.J. "Sookie" Roy of Marksville.

"It's the priority of the funding," Roy said.

Norris said the Legislature provided about $13.5 million for textbooks this year, a $5 million increase over last year, when the textbook budget fell victim to budget cuts.

But schools were still short $6 million of the amount they needed to buy textbooks approved by the state this year, he said.

The Department of Education approves textbooks on a six-year cycle, with materials for several courses considered once during each cycle.

This year the state adopted a new set of textbooks for math, art, foreign languages, computer literacy and vocational subjects, but many school systems only had enough money to buy sufficient textbooks for math classes, Norris said.

He said school systems are allowed to use old textbooks after new versions are

(See TEXTBOOKS, 18A).
schools in Acadia Parish.

"But I think we have to be realistic," Bertrand said, noting that the state is suffering from a shortage of certified teachers.

Adjusting the passing scores on the tests for four teaching fields will allow more education graduates to pass those tests.

Jackie Ducote, representing the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry, a major proponent of the NTE, opposed lowering passing scores. She said she feared the board's action would set a bad precedent, inviting future attempts to weaken the NTE as a tool in certifying teachers. "You get standards," she said, "and people keep coming up with reasons to lower them, and pretty soon we're down to nothing again."

The board voted directly to lower passing scores on three tests - math, business education and social studies - and effectively lowered the score on the music education test by rounding off the passing scores to the nearest multiple of 10. The board also raised the cutoff score for the English test.

The biggest adjustments were made in the math test, which about two-thirds of the potential teachers were failing, and the English test, which very few students have been failing.

The board declined to lower the French score, which has been proposed by the superintendent. Tests for other teaching areas, such as science and physical education, also remain unchanged.

Most of the adjustments in the passing scores were suggested by a panel appointed by former Education Superintendent Kelly Nix, who failed to act on the recommendations before he left office in March.

Shortly after he took office, Education Superintendent Tom Clausen announced he was lowering the scores on the business, French, social studies and math tests - without raising the scores on the English test.

BESE opposed the changes and Gov. Edwards pushed a bill through the Legislature to give the board veto power over the selection of a teacher test and the setting of passing scores. Clausen then requested that the board make the changes recommended by the study panel. He added a request to round off the cutoff scores for the area tests.