St. John teacher welcomes Edwards' strike involvement

RESERVE (AP) — Gov. Edwards' decision to meet with both sides in an attempt to settle the school employees strike in St. John the Baptist Parish was welcomed by a teacher representative, but a school system official had a different reaction.

"He'll probably give hope to the teachers that they can win the strike," said Martin Bonura, a School Board member. "He'll probably prolong the strike by three weeks."

Wilhelmina Armour, a teacher and president of the St. John Association of Educators, said she is pleased that Edwards agreed to intervene.

"We welcome the opportunity for the governor to meet with us," she said. "I just wish he could wave a wand and it would all be over."

Edwards' office said Friday that the governor will meet with both sides at 10 a.m. Monday in New Orleans.

The St. John Parent Action Committee asked the governor in a letter Wednesday to take action in the dispute, saying their children are not receiving the education they deserve.

The strike, involving about 700 employees, began Aug. 28. Most of the

320 teachers joined in, along with teacher aides, school bus drivers, cafeteria workers, secretaries and others.

They are demanding an overall 5 percent pay raise and collective-bargaining rights.

The School Board said there is no money for the pay raise, which it said would cost $550,000 a year, and it is opposed to collective bargaining.

School officials acknowledge that most of the 6,200 students have been staying home. All 15 schools remain open but virtually empty.

In another development, the parents' association on Thursday asked School Board members to meet with the bargaining team of the strikers, no later than Saturday night, to determine if contract negotiations can be held. However, some board members said such a meeting would be contrary to the board's strategy.

Joe Hutchinson, co-chairman of the parents' group, said if the strike goes on much longer, parents probably will have to take legal action to try to force the board to meet with employees.

"The public deserves the right to have the process of education taking place," Hutchinson said. "The facilities are there, but they're not being staffed, and staffing is a responsibility of the board."