State education head Cody outlines priorities for 1991

By DOUG MYERS 12/9/1990

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Lengthening the school day and school year...nation of technology in the classroom promise to be priorities of state Education Superintendent Wilmer Cody throughout 1991.

Additionally, Cody is interested in ensuring two controversial statewide programs - teacher evaluation and "report cards" on the state's 1,456 public schools - are "fine-tuned." and that more programs aimed at reducing the state's alarming 47 percent student dropout rate are implemented.

Cody - Gov. Buddy Roemer's recommended choice in 1988 as the first appointed modern-day superintendent - made the announcements last week during an interview from his 12th-floor, state Education Building office.

As chief administrator for the state Department of Education, Cody administers a state school system that enrolls about 900,000 Louisiana students.

During the interview, Cody reiterated his long-standing belief that a longer school year would give marginal students more class time to make up deficiencies and that such children would be encouraged to stay in school.

Under the Department of Education plan, the year would be lengthened for such marginal students for starters and then increased for all students as a second step.

State education officials believe the system now works against marginal students. Such children do not get as much education as they need in the current school year. Those who are promoted to the next grade tend to lag behind their classmates, and those who are kept back become prime candidates to drop out.

Cody said two-thirds of the schools in Louisiana provide 5 1/2 hours of instruction per day and one-third offer the national average of six hours a day. Children who receive 5 1/2 hours of instruction per day lose a full year of instructional time during their 12 years of elementary and secondary education compared with the national average, proponents of a longer school day argue.

As a result, the education department tried to lengthen the current 180-day school year during the 1990 regular legislative session. Lawmakers would not go along with the idea, which would cost $10 million to $15 million for extra salaries and other costs.

"We will again be recommending that along with additional state funds, provided that the minimum school year be increased perhaps a couple of days," Cody said.

Cody said there will be an increasing number of programs in schools that do that statewide, using state and federal funding to implement them.

"I believe it is better to have a student go to school more days per year to keep them than to fail a student for a year, hoping he will catch up - because they rarely do," he said.

In addition, Cody would like to increase the use of computers in the classroom and "distance learning" programs, which use a sophisticated, interactive telephone-television system to connect tutors with students needing attention.

Last year, the state Legislature rejected a proposal by Roemer that would have installed computer-based reading and writing labs in all Louisiana elementary schools - at a cost of $34 million. Lawmakers balked, questioning Roemer's haste, the cost and value of the program and the lack of competition from computer firms other than the Roemer-backed IBM program.
Cody said he expects the Legislature to consider more computer-in-school proposals during this year’s session. As a “parallel activity,” he said he believes school systems will continue to use local and federal funding to increase the number of computers in their schools.

“I expect that expansion to continue at a rapid rate,” Cody said.

Another expansion, Cody said, that will be pushed is the increased use of “distance learning.”

The state is spending $2 million this year to expand the Louisiana School for Math, Science and the Arts’ “telelearning program” to allow 114 of the state’s 335 public high schools to improve their curricula and improve students’ chances to pick colleges of their choice.

The expanded program is the first of a two-part plan that eventually would include televised advanced placement courses — high school classes offered at the senior level and carrying college credit.

Cody said the latter program will be pushed for implementation in the 1991-92 school year.

Furthermore, Cody said the state education department will pay “even more attention to programs that reduce dropouts in this next year and in following years than we have in the past.”

“We’ll spend more time in identifying what’s successful in some parishes and helping other parishes implement the programs that work,” Cody said.

Cody said he does not believe the state will overhaul the new, but controversial, statewide teacher evaluation program. It, as well as the recently released “report cards” on public schools, just need to be sharpened, he said.

“I think ‘fine-tuning’ is the best word,” Cody said. “I see no need to change the basic framework for the evaluation.”

Cody said the “report cards,” which compare schools in areas such as suspension rates and achievement test scores, “probably will be a little more intelligible to the average citizen.”

He also said problems associated with the “report cards” should be cleared up before release of the 1990-91 school year batch late this year.

Suspension rates, ACT scores and teacher educational attainment levels were often inaccurate in the first set of profiles released last month.

Cody, nevertheless, said he was pleased with the two new programs. “A lot of people two years ago said it was impossible to get those things done in that length of time,” Cody said. “I’m real pleased with what the staff has accomplished and really pleased with the cooperation of school districts across the state in those two efforts. We still have some improvements to make, but the basic programs are in place.”