Statewide emphasis on education urged

By CARL REDMAN
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Members of a Sunday Advocate economic panel leveled a stinging blast at Louisiana's education system, pointing to the sorry state of Louisiana education as one barrier to attracting new business and industry to the state.

Although there are a number of impediments to improvement of the Louisiana economy, education stands as one of the most critical, said representatives of some of Louisiana's most important business and industrial sectors.

Outside industry can build plants, but it must look to the local community to find the people to run those plants, and those prospective employees must be the products of a good education system, said Carl Kentsil, president of CIBA-GEIGY's agriculture division.

"As an outsider, I will be blunt about it: I don't think you can be very proud of the elementary and secondary education system of this state. That becomes a problem for the employer who needs people who can read. That is another issue."

Ocean Drilling and Exploration Co. chief executive officer Hugh Kelly labeled the state's elementary and secondary education as "disgraceful."

"The primary reason why people don't come here is because of the disgraceful education system you have here," Kelly said.

Businessmen in the New Orleans area point to the lack of education quality as the single biggest problem in the Crescent City area, Kelly said.

"A lot flows from an educated populace," Kelly said.

If ODECO is trying to recruit a promising young engineer to its New Orleans operation, the recruit looks closely at the New Orleans school situation and quickly finds he must either put his children in the public schools or spend several thousand dollars a year for one of the parochial schools, Kelly said.

As a result, Kelly advised, Louisiana would do well in its long-term planning to place special emphasis on education.

Louisiana needs to develop a plan to upgrade its education system, and citizens must realize that any cure will be a long time coming, that there is no quick turnaround from the present situation, LSU economics professor David Johnson said.

Johnson advocated putting the emphasis on improving the elementary and secondary levels as a step toward equipping more people with the ability to read and write, skills necessary for normal discourse.

If you look closely at education spending, it becomes apparent that the state is putting too much money in the wrong places, said Greater Baton Rouge Chamber of Commerce president Bill Little.

"We spend $2,800 a year for each child in the state," Little said. "If you multiply that by 28 students, you find that the state spends about $80,000 per class. Less than $20,000 of that goes to the teacher, less than $1,000 goes for textbooks and materials. We have been unable to discover where the rest goes."

Little said the Chamber and the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry are watching very closely the progress of a study by the Legislative Fiscal Office of where the state's education dollars are spent.

Chamber officials hope the study is complete sometime in March so it can be used during the regular legislative session to point the way for lobbying efforts, he said.

"This state is totally unwilling to look at performance-based raises, merit pay," Little said. "Methods for doing this have been devised and are working in other states... Unless we are willing to become accountable and do it immediately, we're not going to be viewed as taking this problem seriously."

We were well on the way toward making many reforms with our business coalition (last year) when the governor turned his back and walked away from the reform coalition.

Little said he would oppose any move toward a so-called voucher plan for providing public education.