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Published: Jan 25, 2008 - Page: 9A

The state will take the unusual step of offering fourth- and eighth-grade public school students telephone tutoring to try to improve scores on a key test, officials said Thursday.

The aim is to help students do better on LEAP, which fourth- and eighth-graders have to pass to move to the next grade.

The exam, which begins March 10, is designed to make sure that students master basic skills in math and English before they are promoted.

The tutoring is one of several steps the state is taking after lackluster test scores in September set off alarm bells last year.

“We want to offer some extra options,” said state Superintendent of Education Paul Pastorek on Thursday.

The state has already sent all of Louisiana’s fourth- and eighth-graders practice tests, which are aimed at helping students grapple with questions similar to the actual exam.

That is more than in the past, when students were provided with 10 or so sample questions.

The new assistance, which officials call the LEAP tutoring helpline, will operate from Feb. 1 through March 7 from 5 p.m. until 7 p.m.

The lines will be open Monday-Friday. The number is 1 (877) 453-2721.

The goal is to get the students to take the practice tests home and work on a few problems each night, said Cheryl Michelet, press secretary for the state Department of Education. Her office will oversee the effort.

Students who encounter problems on the practice test can call the state and learn both the answer and, more importantly, how to arrive at the answer, Michelet said.

Six operators will field the questions. That group will include two certified elementary teachers, three workers trained to aid students on the LEAP practice test and an education program consultant, Michelet said.

LEAP tutor helpline planned

Mel LeCompte, who does remedial work with students in grades five-eight at Lawtell Elementary School near Opelousas, said state education officials deserve credit for offering the new LEAP assistance.

How far it goes, however, is another question.

“Those that want to will find the help they need,” he said. “Those that don’t want it, you could drag it right in front of them and they would not take advantage of it.”

Rudy Baker, a fourth-grade teacher at South Street Elementary School in Opelousas, said Thursday he is optimistic that students and parents will take advantage of the service.

“I think it is a tremendous idea and that it can help,” Baker said.

The tutoring is one of several steps the state has launched since annual state report cards on public schools triggered alarms.

The results showed that 68 percent of schools statewide showed little growth, no growth or outright declines. Schools showed their worst performance since the reports were issued in 1999.

One in three eighth-graders failed the LEAP exam last spring. Fourth-graders showed solid gains.

In another move to improve scores, the state’s top school board last week approved \$1.5 million in emergency assistance to nearly 100 troubled public schools statewide, including 27 in East Baton Rouge Parish. That spending triggered controversy but won board approval 10-1.

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