

Lawsuits not best solution

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Democratic Gov. John Bel Edwards has made a “peace of sorts” with Republican state Attorney General Jeff Landry, and he should consider doing the same with John White, the appointed state superintendent of education. The governor’s disagreements with both public officials have led to lawsuits that simply sap energy and time needed for more pressing issues.

Edwards and Landry aren’t talking, but The Advocate said, “In the meantime, they are no longer flinging sharp words back and forth.” The governor agreed to release money Landry wanted. Landry approved a contract Edwards wanted that allows him to hire private attorneys preparing lawsuits against oil and gas companies.

The governor’s issue with White began during the 2015 campaign. Edwards said then he wanted to replace White, who was appointed to the post by the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Edwards has been stymied because he doesn’t have enough allies on BESE to remove White, and White doesn’t have enough allies to get him a new contract. He has been working without one.

BESE has 11 members, eight who are elected by the people and three who are appointed by the governor. It takes eight of those members (twothirds) to hire or fire the superintendent and neither side has the necessary votes.

The major issues that separate White’s supporters and opponents are school vouchers, charter schools, teacher evaluations and school changes planned by White under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act. Public school advocates believe the voucher program and charter schools are taking education dollars away from traditional public schools.

State Sen. Bodi White, R-Central, spoke for many of his legislative colleagues when he said there is growing support in Louisiana and nationally for state education dollars following students to the schools of their choice.

Fourteen citizens filed a lawsuit questioning White’s authority to keep working, and Edwards contends White should have been confirmed during this year’s regular legislative session.

A state district court judge dismissed the suit, saying the citizens didn't have standing to file the suit. Edwards is one of four public officials who do have standing, but said he is considering whether he would file a lawsuit.

Edwards' support of the public education system is understandable. Its political arms were key players in his successful election in 2015. However, the governor has tried for two years to pursue public education's goals in the Legislature, but has been largely unsuccessful.

Republicans played a key role in helping enact public education reforms during the Bobby Jindal administration, and they are even stronger today. Two strong allies in that reform effort are the Council for a Better Louisiana and the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry.

CABL and LABI support Superintendent White's efforts. CABL notes that two independent national organizations within one week praised the state's education improvement plan. In one, Louisiana received high marks of 4 or 5 in eight of the nine categories that were reviewed.

The Alliance for Excellent Education said, "Louisiana's new education plan is one of the most promising in the United States." It gave the state green lights in 11 of the 13 categories reviewed.

Barry Erwin, president of CABL, said, "The results of these reviews are extremely encouraging. They provide strong validation that Louisiana's policies to accelerate progress in student achievement are on the right track."

LABI says, "Over the last two decades, Louisiana has made great strides in education reform. Our state offers more choice for quality educational opportunities than most other states. The traditional public school system continues to improve. We have become a national model for innovation and commitment to reform."

It is difficult to argue with success, but both sides on these education issues will certainly continue their efforts to fight for their causes. However, when the public's best interests are at stake, each group has to give a little when no progress seems possible.

The two men who spoke on behalf of Edwards and Landry in efforts to resolve some of the disagreements between those two public officials offered The Advocate some sound explanations for trying to work

together.

Businessman Shane Guidry, a special assistant to the attorney general, said, "Now is not the time for fireworks. Now is the time to make the best decisions we can for the state of Louisiana and the taxpayers."

Dan Robin Sr., a major fundraiser for Edwards, said, "It's important for the state that these two work together. That's the bottom line."

How long this limited peace will last is anybody's guess, but it is progress.

What has worked — at least temporarily — for these two adversaries is worth trying in efforts to resolve the disagreements between Edwards and White. A possible break in BESE's voting deadlock is a better solution than another time-consuming lawsuit.