

School choice bill falls in House

■ York County Republicans helped defeat the governor's proposal, though Ridge vows to fight another day.

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HARRISBURG — After a bloody battle over school choice that pitted members of the governor's own party against each other, Gov. Tom Ridge has conceded to his opponents.

"We lost fair and square," Ridge said late Friday night, after House lawmakers spent nearly nine hours debating the issue on the floor.

But Ridge made clear he wasn't finished with trying to reform the state's public education system.

"I've only just begun," he said of his first major political defeat since taking office six months ago. "I'm not done asking."

For Ridge, school choice pitched and swayed through stormy political waters. He and House Republican leaders cajoled, promised and pleaded with lawmakers to stand with their governor.

But in the end, the governor could not persuade enough fellow Republicans to keep his controversial \$42.8 million proposal afloat. Lawmakers sent the bill to a committee and adjourned for the weekend. The \$42.8 million will return to the general fund.

Two months ago, when Ridge first introduced his plan, he angered many Republicans, some his ardent supporters. They questioned his tactics at winning support for it, and wondered if the governor's motives behind pushing such an ambitious proposal were more political than policy.

His plan would have fundamentally changed public education by giving parents grants to send their children to the private or parochial school of their choice. It met stiff resistance from six of York County's lawmakers, who argued, among

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other things, that the plan was constitutionally flawed.

Only one local lawmaker, Rep. Michael Waugh, a Shrewsbury Township Republican, supported the measure. Waugh had been undecided until Friday morning, when he told a local business group at a breakfast that he would oppose school choice.

However, Waugh said the arguments supporting school choice that were made during the debate in the afternoon convinced him to vote yes.

"If this bill had been voted this morning, I would have been a no vote," Waugh said. "I support the theory of choice and the concept of choice."

Ridge did not concede until the House voted 106 to 95 against his proposal. But House Speaker Matthew J. Ryan struck that vote from the record, claiming the voting machine malfunctioned because a couple of members' votes did not appear on the board. Those members were simply not voting.

Lawmakers started shouting, booing and banging their desks, demanding that the vote stand. Democratic Minority Leader H. William DeWeese shouted at Ryan:

"There was no malfunction in the machinery in this hall and you know it. One hundred and six to 95, Mr. Speaker, is a clear-cut majority. I think you owe this chamber an apology for that kind of parliamentary bushwhacking and buccanering."

DeWeese chastised Ryan for "a terrible parliamentary misdeed."

After a bit more shouting, lawmakers voted to adjourn, and the Republican leaders went to Ridge and told him they lost the fight.

Despite the Yorks delegation's opposition, the governor and Re-

THE VOTE

How York County's House lawmakers voted on school choice Friday. Their votes were subsequently struck from the record by the House leadership.

- Rep. Al Masland, R-Franklintown..... No
- Rep. Steven Nickol, R-Hanover..... No
- Rep. Todd Piatts, R-Spring Garden..... No
- Rep. Stan Saylor, R-Red Lion..... No
- Rep. Michael Waugh, R-Shrewsbury Township...Yes
- Rep. Bruce Smith, R-Dillsburg..... No
- Rep. Stephen Stetter, D-York..... No

publican leaders battled for the votes of Waugh and Rep. Stan Saylor, R-Red Lion.

Saylor, who looked tired after weeks of fending off pleas to switch his vote, would only smile when asked about the rumor that he was offered a leadership post, a tantalizing offer for any ambitious two-term lawmaker.

For Waugh, another two-term lawmaker, the pressure for his vote became so intense that he had to go for a walk in a park near the Capitol after one of the late-night sessions ended. While the debate droned on, the lawmaker took a walk through the Capitol, still unsure how to vote.

School choice supporters may have some hope in the Senate, which was planning to vote on the bill next week. Sen. James Gerlach, a Pottstown Republican, intends to introduce a bill calling for a three-year pilot program for school choice.

Gerlach's bill mostly mirrors the governor's proposal. As many as six school districts can participate, but there must be at least one urban, one suburban and one rural district involved.

Gerlach said Ridge's proposal, which provides school choice to all

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of the state's 501 school districts within three years, is too untested to become statewide so quickly.

"My position is simply that before we go from the drawing board to mass production, we ought to build a prototype," the senator said. "We ought to test it first."

Senate leadership sources said Gerlach's argument has been com-

polling enough that it has proponents of the governor's proposal re-thinking their vote.

"There's a lot of interest over here," one source said.

It's not clear whether Ridge would support a pilot program. He refused to accept a pilot program throughout the two-month debate on the issue. He would not say Friday whether he would now support such a program.