

School reform hits Senate snag

By TIM RICHARD
STAFF WRITER

Gov. John Engler and state Senate Republicans are in deep trouble with their "charter" and "choice" school reform plans.

Two Republican senators Tuesday refused to support the bills, and a third tugged at the party reins for hours.

Democrats won't give the GOP any votes toward the two-thirds majority (26) needed to put any tax reform plan on the ballot unless the GOP tones down the "charter" and "choice" plans.

"There will come a time when you'll need us, but the wheels will be off the buggy," Democrat Jack Faxon of Farmington Hills warned Republicans, who hold a 22 to 16 paper majority.

"We're not going to vote to fund something we don't agree with," said Sen. Debbie Stabenow of Lansing, a Democratic gubernatorial candidate. "You want to dismantle public education."

"I asked a bipartisan working group that would sit down quietly and not observe the Open Meetings Act to discuss what direction we'd go," said Democrat Lana Pollack of Ann Arbor. She praised David Honigman of West Bloomfield as the only Republican willing to negotiate.

Union tactic

Republicans hurriedly got the 20 votes they needed to pass the

charter schools, schools of choice, teacher tenure and teacher bargaining bills Engler wants.

Two Republicans jumped ship — maverick Fred Dillingham of Fowlerville, who said the charter school plan should be tried first on a pilot basis, and arch conservative Doug Carl of Utica, who didn't want charter schools to be covered by "outcomes-based education." Both voted no.

In addition, freshman Sen. Phil Hoffman, R-Jackson, voted against the "choice" plan, sending it to defeat on the first try. Embarrassed GOP leaders called a caucus late in the afternoon and worked on him for two hours before Hoffman, known to be friendly to unions, switched to a yes vote.

Meanwhile, Senate Democrats are using a union collective bargaining tactic — nothing, not even minor bills, will be agreed to until the entire package of school bills is agreed to.

Republicans can pass the quality bills Engler wants in the Senate by using party muscle. But placing on the ballot a constitutional amendment raising the state tax limit and sales tax rate will require 26 votes. So at least four Democrats — and maybe six or seven — must support that measure (Senate Joint Resolution S).

"If you want to do the quality votes by yourself, you're going to have to do the tax votes by your-

self," warned Senate Democratic floor leader John Cherry of Clio.

The Democrats' message: No 26 votes for the finance package unless the "charter" and "choice" bills are negotiated.

"Ultimately," Cherry continued, "we're going to turn over the process to the House by (Republicans) jamming this package through because they (House leaders) are going to reach a compromise."

He referred to last week's deal between the co-chairmen of the House Education Committee — Democrat William Keith of Garden City and Republican William Bryant of Grosse Pointe — to junk the charter school idea in favor of less radical public school "academics."

On a straight party line vote, Democrats lost an effort to "tie bar" the quality bills to SJR S, the constitutional amendment.

The most controversial measure (Senate Bill 690) would allow charter schools — special schools chartered by public agencies, receiving state money but not subject to the teacher tenure and collective bargaining laws.

All local senators voted with their parties.

Republican Dillingham, who has repeatedly broken party lines this year, said he favors the charter idea, "but it should be tried on a limited, pilot project basis. We run the risk of increasing the cost of public education dramatically."

if many of the 200,000 pupils in private schools shift to public charter schools.

Gubernatorial hopeful Stabenow called charter schools "a backdoor way to fund private schools. It allows any state agency or person to set up something called a charter school. It treats students as customers."

A second bill (SB 872) would exempt charter schools from teacher tenure laws. Faxon called it "clothing for the corpse," predicting charter schools never will become law. Dillingham objected that the bill "sets up a two-tiered system" for teachers.

SB 878 prescribes separate collective bargaining units for charter school teachers.

Democrats called the schools of choice bill (SB 891) "a farce," in Stabenow's words, because individual districts may choose not to accept non-resident pupils.

Faxon fired a long list of objections at the choice bill, a lengthy amendment to the 1976 school code.

"I'm appalled at the suddenness and immediacy of the changes."

His suburban districts will be saddled with new administrative costs but get just 1 percent more revenue.

The five Senate bills will be referred to the House Education Committee, which is working on its own versions.

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