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School voucher plans debated

by Kevin Haggerty

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Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Ridge has two school voucher proposals due to be introduced next month, but the topic was fuel for a heated debate recently at the University of Pittsburgh.

The William Pitt Debating Union sponsored the March 23 debate on public education.

Among the six-member panel was Monumental Baptist Church Pastor Rev. Thomas E. Smith, who is strongly opposed to vouchers.

Smith said the Ridge initiative uses children as "test dummies" and called the proposal "detrimental to the children."

Education Secretary Eugene Hickok defended Ridge's plan. One of the proposals, if passed, would create a five-year pilot program that would provide Educational Opportunity Grants to parents in specific counties to send their children to the school of their choice. The allocations would come from the state, not public school districts.

The second Ridge proposal is part of the recently introduced Academic Recovery Act, and would give parents the per-pupil allocation in their current school district to apply the tuition at their choice school.

Taking money from any school district's budget troubles Smith.

"Taxpayers spend an estimated \$14 billion on their public schools," he said. "Cutting these subsidies to the public schools will only create a vulnerable state as a whole."

Smith added it costs taxpayers approximately \$30,000 per year to keep a person in jail, compared to \$3,000 per year to keep a child in school.

Other members of the panel included Melissa Butler, a full-time substitute teacher; Allegheny Institute Senior Research Fellow David Kirkpatrick; University of Pittsburgh student Denise Olczak; and Pitt student Bianca Huff.

Smith said the Ridge administration and others need to focus their energy on answering the question, "Why is the system hurting our children?"