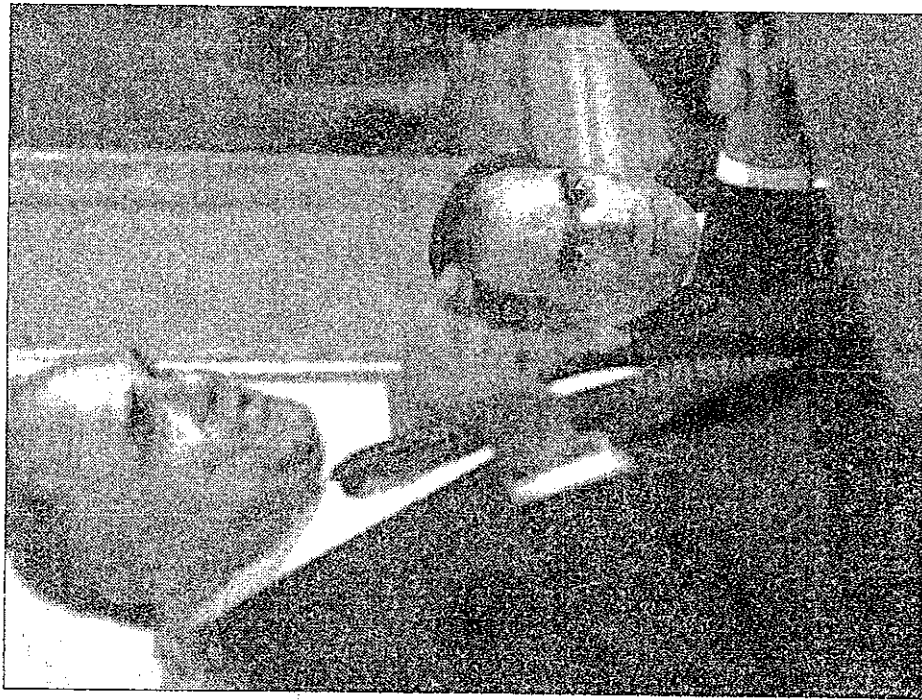


LOCAL NEWS

Rendell, Casey spar on issues, records



Matt Freed/Post-Gazette

Democratic gubernatorial candidate Ed Rendell speaks before the African-American Chamber of Commerce yesterday as his opponent, Bob Casey Jr., listens.

By James O'Toole
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The Democratic candidates for governor clashed on their education plans and records yesterday in a face-to-face replay of the dueling television commercials that have flooded the state's airwaves in recent weeks.

In a forum before the African-American Chamber of Commerce, Auditor General Bob Casey contended that former Philadelphia Mayor Ed Rendell had misled voters on the performance of the Philadelphia school system.

Rendell heatedly defended that record while charging that Casey's proposals for school funding would shortchange the state's students.

Rendell, who has called for the legalization of slot machines at the state's race tracks to come up with more funds for schools, also said that he would consider opening the door to other expansions of gambling.

"As we go down the road, I would look at riverboat gambling," he said, suggesting that the revenue from riverboats could help the state expand prescription drug assistance for senior citizens.

The two Democrats sat together in the Rivers Club, Downtown, in a two-hour panel discussion that also included several candidates for the state House and Senate.

Rendell and Casey were in accord on the need for the state to do more to promote minority business. Casey pointed out that his office had issued a critical audit of a state

program designed to help women and minority-owned business.

"What we found was appalling," he said, promising to revamp and strengthen the state's efforts as governor.

Rendell boasted of more than doubling the number of city contracts going to minority businesses in Philadelphia, and said he had also prodded private firms to increase opportunities for minorities in commercial projects aided by the city.

Several of their exchanges would have been familiar to regular television viewers. Casey charged that Rendell had left his city's schools in debt and with abysmal average test scores two years before it was seized by the state.

Of Rendell's ads touting his education record, Casey said, "I think he misled the people."

Rendell, who had appeared tired through portions of the event, grew animated as he defended his education performance.

"Did we take the school system and improve it? Absolutely," Rendell shot back.

Echoing his own commercials, Rendell said that the Philadelphia school system had extended full-day kindergarten to all students under his tenure while test scores for the district went up five years in a row.

"Those are the facts," he said.

Casey said that the state should increase its proportion of local school funding but warned that the state's looming budget deficit

means the increase could come only gradually.

"We can do that over time, year by year, step by step, increasing the share for basic education," Casey said.

Rendell, who has pledged to provide significantly more money for schools in his first year in office, said, "We have to get there right now ... what you've heard from Bob is the standard talk you've heard from politicians for years."

One area of agreement for the two rivals was their wariness over the possibility that the Legislature could postpone the primary election, scheduled for May 21. While the Republican leadership claims it wants to avoid such a delay, GOP legislators have warned that it could be a byproduct of their response to a court's rejection of the state's congressional redistricting plan.

"Those in Harrisburg who want to play games with the election should think twice," Casey said.

Rendell called that prospect "cruel and unusual punishment," pointing out that he and Casey had crafted strategy and campaign budgets predicated on the May 21 date. A delay, he said, would confer "a tremendous advantage" on the GOP's candidate, Attorney General Mike Fisher.

"It would be manifestly unfair," Rendell said. "But, if it happens, it happens. We'll deal with it," he added with a shrug as he dashed out early to attend a fund-raising event.